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MATTIWILDA DOBBS: A STUDY OF RACE, CLASS, AND GENDER IN OPERA

by

LINDSEY BAKER

Under the Direction of Lia Bascomb, PhD

ABSTRACT

Throughout history, African-American women classical singers have been able to have successful careers. Mattiwilda Dobbs was a pioneer in opera. She was the first African-American woman to sing at La Scala Opera House in Milan. Dobbs was also the first African-American woman to sing a lead romantic role at the Metropolitan Opera in New York. Throughout her career, she was very vocal about race and class issues in the United States. This thesis explores her words to analyze and understand how race, class, and gender affected her life and career and to understand how she fits into the larger discussion of African-American women opera singers.

INDEX WORDS: Mattiwilda Dobbs, African-American, classical music, opera, intersectionality

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LINDSEY BAKER

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in the College of Arts and Sciences

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2017

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1 INTRODUCTION

Mattiwilda Dobbs (1925-2015), an African-American coloratura soprano, gained international stardom beginning in the 1940s. Dobbs began her career in her hometown, Atlanta, Georgia. Being from the Southern United States, Dobbs understood racial division and the tensions among African-Americans and white people. These experiences shaped the way that Dobbs would approach her personal and professional life. Societal notions of race, class, and gender affected the career path of Black women musicians. The rise of the Black middle-class during this time also gave young Black women access to the learning and performance of classical music (Meier 1963, 139). This would prove to be true for Mattiwilda Dobbs as her father exposed her and her sisters to museums, plays, and operas. Classical music was more popular in the northern United States, so Dobbs traveled to New York for training. Shortly thereafter, she would travel to Europe to start her career.

Throughout the history of African-Americans in classical music, singing was always viewed as a proper career choice for Black women. Being a pianist was also a suitable option for Black women. Dobbs would follow this tradition, studying both piano and voice. Local Black churches provided training for young Black women who wanted voice instruction. The Black church also gave African-American singers the opportunity to perform in front of an audience. First Congregational Church in Atlanta would become an early performance venue for Dobbs.

Mattiwilda Dobbs was among the growing number of African-American sopranos in the United States during the 20th century. Dobbs grew up in the South during the first half of the 20th century when the South was segregated. Her father, John Wesley Dobbs, was a prominent leader in the African-American community. He was deemed the “unofficial mayor of Auburn Avenue,” a street that was home to many thriving African-American businesses (Bailey 2014). Her father’s

social status along with the segregated South would shape her personal and professional life. Her family was friends with the King family and Martin Luther King Jr. was her childhood friend.

Being an opera singer, Dobbs was able to break down many barriers for African-Americans and being the first African-American to sing at La Scala in Italy was one of many firsts. Her career as an opera singer laid the groundwork for those to come after her. Stigmas in opera about African-Americans would also affect how Dobbs would prepare for roles, how she would look for a particular role, and how critics would ultimately view the complete performance of the opera. The purpose of this thesis is to understand how race, class, and gender affected Mattiwilda Dobbs's career trajectory, how it affected her personal life, and how Dobbs fits into the larger narrative of African-American opera singers.

To understand how race, class, and gender affected Mattiwilda Dobbs during her career, the author analyzed Dobbs's description of events in her life, the experiences of other African-American opera singers with the theories of intersectionality, the sonic color line, and voice-object theory. The author begins with a brief history of the early 20th century to understand the landscape of opera, African-American life, and how African-American classical singers were navigating the world of opera. Then, the author gives a biography of Dobbs's life and finally, using Dobbs's words, the author examined race, class, and gender in her personal and professional life.

For the analysis of race, the author looked at the roles given to African-American singers, how those roles were constructed, exoticism and makeup practices in opera, "sonic Blackness," and how these ideas affected Dobbs's performance practices. The author also examined how Dobbs felt about the issues that were plaguing the African-American community and how her upbringing and moving to Europe shaped her ideas about the African-American community. In

trying to understand how class affected Dobbs, the author examined her upbringing from her perspective and from the perspective of writers and scholars. To understand how gender roles and stereotypes affected Dobbs, the author examined how gender factored into her debut, how appearance influenced the roles given to women in opera, and how music critics wrote about the appearance of opera singers. Lastly, the author brought these elements together to show how they intersected and shaped Dobbs's experience.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Classical Music in 19th Century America

Classical music in early 19th century America was produced mostly in Northern states such as Massachusetts, New York, and Pennsylvania. Many of the musicians that formed the early choral groups were amateur singers. In 1815, the Handel and Haydn Society was founded in Boston. The Handel and Haydn Society was one of the early choral groups to perform Handel's *Messiah* and *Creation* in America. In 1832, Lowell Mason, a member of the Handel and Haydn Society, established the Boston Academy of Music. The primary focus of the Academy was to promote the performance of sacred music. Although opposed by Mason, the Boston Academy formed an orchestra in 1833. Like the early choral groups, the orchestra was comprised of amateurs and professionals. The orchestra had presented symphonies by Beethoven, Mozart, and Mendelssohn to America for the first time (Horowitz 2005, 28-29).

The symphony orchestra that was developing in America was vastly different from the European orchestras. The musicians in symphony orchestras in Europe were professional musicians unlike the musicians in the developing symphony orchestra musicians in America. Many of the musicians in America spent most of their time in other professions such as tailors or merchants. Thus, there was less time devoted to rehearsing the music. Although classical music was on the rise in America, different musicians in varying cities had different ideas about what American classical music should sound like. Musicians of Boston were more pleased by music that had no associations with folk art while the musicians of New York were pleased by music that included cultural themes. Ultimately, both ideas would influence the classical music of the time (Horowitz 2005, 28-29). During this time, opera had not garnered much attention from the

majority of Americans and it was considered a luxury to go and view an opera performance (Ibid., 135).

2.2 Northern Black Communities

In *The Negro Church in America* (1964), E. Franklin Frazier discusses how communities of free Black people were growing in the North and how Northern Black people began to create their own societies with certain ideas about race, class, and gender. The number of Black businesses began to increase in the North. Black people in the North formed their own churches and this would contribute to the hierarchies that began to form. Members of the Black elite began to create social norms that would structure Northern Black communities. These ideas also determined the structure of the church services (35-37). There became a differentiation in the preference of music in church between middle- and upper-class Black people and lower-class Black people. Middle- and upper-class Black people began to move away from the singing of spirituals and move toward the use of hymnals, while lower-class Black people kept singing spirituals during their services (Lincoln & Mamiya 1990, 355-357). In *The Black Church Since Frazier* (1974), C. Eric Lincoln argues that some Black churches were attempting to replicate white churches. He says,

At times it [the Black Church] has seen itself as a less perfect counterpart of the white Church, striving for parity in perfection. This self-demeaning undervaluation made some “Negro” churches more “white” in their ritual behavior and their social attitudes than many of the white churches they sought to emulate. Black ministers with “Scottish-Presbyterian” accents, the distribution of church offices on the basis of skin color, the effort to exclude from the worship services every vestige of “Negro music” or “Negro emotionalism” have at times illustrated the uncertainty the Black Church has had about its role and its function (113).

Middle and upper-class Black families in the North adopted the social ideals of Northern white people. The Northern Blacks thought these ideals would uplift the race. They expected young Black people to engage in intellectual and artistic activities (Wright 1984, 18). Young Black women were expected to play piano, sing, and engage in other artistic endeavors. The young women would often perform in their homes for guests (Southern 1997, 101). In *The Music of Black Americans: A History* (1997), Eileen Southern describes these performances as “trite” and “superficial” because the purpose of the music was to draw certain emotions such as sadness or bedazzlement (101).

The Northern Blacks were going through the process of enculturation in hopes of becoming integrated in to white society (Wright, Floyd, and Southern 1992, 374). Because of location and access to certain resources, young Black women began to pursue professional music careers. In 1878, James Trotter compiled the first history of Black musicians of the nineteenth century. His work, *Music and Some Highly Musical People*, featured many short biographies of Black women musicians. This work was followed by Dr. Lawson Scruggs’s *Women of Distinction* (1893) and Dr. Monroe Majors’s *Noted Negro Women* (1893).

2.3 The Influence of the Black Church on Black Women as Concert Singers

The church became a central part of the African-American community during the nineteenth century. Many of these churches offered sacred Music concerts that featured solo and ensemble singing. This gave many young Black women exposure to classical singing. The concerts often featured instrumentalists as well. In the early part of the century, the singers would perform the works of Handel and later in the century, Mozart, Haydn, and Gluck. Many of the churches took on some of the major works in the repertoire such as Handel’s *Creation*, which lasts about two hours and requires a 55-member orchestra and a chorus of about 150 people.

There was also an inclusion of Black composers featured at the concerts as well. Some of the churches operated singing schools for singers and others studied privately. The singers who were primarily soloists often had private instruction (Southern 1997, 104-105).

2.4 Professional Training for Black Women

During the nineteenth century, Black women received musical training from private instructors in the United States and internationally. The Oberlin Conservatory, the Boston Conservatory, and the New England Conservatory began admitting Black women in the late 1860s. Some Black women also received training at Hampton Institute and Fisk University (Wright 1984, 19). Fisk University had a choir called the Fisk Jubilee Singers that was formed in 1866. The group included eleven singers and a pianist, Ella Shepherd. The group performed arranged Negro spirituals as well as European classical music. Their director, George L. White, thought it would be beneficial to let the students sing “their own music” (Southern 1997, 227). White thought that the students should sing spirituals because they were created by African-Americans. Although middle- and upper-class Black people were moving away from the singing of spirituals, the singing of arranged spirituals in a performance would have been acceptable because arranged spirituals pair African-American expression through a European musical format. After a local performance, White decided to take the students on tour around America to raise money for the school (Southern 1997, 227-229).

Taking the students on tour was a risk because they did not know how they would be received. They did not want to be viewed as a part of minstrelsy and their performances did not include dances or humor. These students introduced Negro Spirituals to audiences that they never would have reached. The beginning of their tour was not very successful. Over time, they became more popular and they were invited to sing at the World Peace Jubilee in 1872. It was at

this festival that the Fisk Jubilee Singers made their debut. After their performance at the World Peace Jubilee, they were asked to perform internationally. They paved the way for similar groups to emerge as Jubilee Singers (Southern 1997, 227-229).

The Northern audiences wanted Negro spirituals to be musically notated and publications of spirituals followed. During their time of popularity in the 1870s, the concertized spirituals were considered authentic but scholars have now called their authenticity into question. The musical nuances and ornamentations of traditional African-American singing could not be notated using Western musical notation because many of the Negro spiritual melodies cannot be placed in the parameters of a Western diatonic scale. When transcribed using a piano, much of the character is lost (Wright, Floyd, and Southern 1992, 151-153). The singing of spirituals in a concert setting presented the spiritual in a “respectable” way, which contrasted from the perception of the original context in which spirituals were sung (Eidsheim 2011, 653-654).

2.5 Black Women Concert and Opera Singers

The earliest known African-American concert singers emerge out of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Philadelphia had become a cultural and social hub for many African-Americans. As a result of this, the first known singer, Elizabeth Taylor Greenfield (1824-1876), began touring the United States after her debut in 1851. She was given the name “Black Swan” by the white media outlets (Southern 1997, 103-104).

By the late nineteenth century, many classically-trained Black women were referred to as “prima donnas” by the newspapers. The “prima donnas” were concert singers who had become internationally known. The “prima donnas” studied privately in some schools in Boston and Rhode Island without facing discrimination. Nellie Brown, a “prima donna” who had studied at the New England Conservatory, made her debut in 1882 and began touring with the Bergen Star

Concert Company. She was called “America’s greatest singer of African descent.” Perhaps the most renowned “prima donna” of her time, Matilda Sissieretta Jones (1869-1933) rose to fame in the late 1800s. She was given the name “Black Patti” by the press. Her voice was often compared to the Spanish “prima donna” Adelina Patti. Her career began to flourish in 1892 after a performance at the White House for President Benjamin Harrison. Following the performance, she began touring internationally (Southern 1997, 244-248). The Hyers Sisters, Anna Madah Hyers and Emma Louise Hyers, toured as a duo and made their debut in Boston in 1872 at ages 14 and 16, respectively. They performed mostly sacred music. The sisters created a company and began touring. They expanded their repertoire to drama and opera buffa (Wright, Floyd, and Southern 1992, 380).

Once a level of success was reached many of the “prima donnas” created singing troupes and would tour the United States (Southern 1997, 244-247). The Black “prima donna” career spanned three to four years on stage and many of them opened music studios and began teaching. By the end of the nineteenth century, the Black “prima donna” had become significantly less popular. Young Black women were still being trained as classical singers although the public displayed less interest in seeing them. Some of the “prima donnas” joined vaudeville and minstrel shows because racial prejudice in the United States hindered their career advancement into the twentieth century (Wright, Floyd, and Southern 1992, 373).

2.6 Other Musical Professions Held by Black Women

Teaching became a profession that many Black women pursued. Being an educator was viewed as an acceptable career choice for Black women during this time. Many Black women taught voice or piano which is what ideally a woman music educator would teach (Wright, Floyd, and Southern 1992, 391). Black women who pursued careers as teachers often taught

choir and not band because women were often discouraged from learning wind instruments. Revella Hughes (1895-1987), a celebrated soprano, taught band at Douglass High School in West Virginia. She was one of few Black women to be able to obtain a leadership position at a public high school (McGinty 1997, 218). Some Black women opened schools. Harriet Gibbs Marshall (1869-1941) was the first Black woman to graduate from the Oberlin Conservatory. In 1903, she opened the Washington Conservatory of Music and School of Expression in Washington, D.C. She hired other Black women musicians as faculty of the institution. Many other Black women would open music schools across the country (Wright 1984, 20).

Rachel Washington was a music educator and began teaching out of her home in 1876. She opened a singing school for adults who wanted to learn how to sing. In 1884, Washington published *The Study of Music Made Easy: Musical Truth*. She was recognized for her ability to teach any person music regardless of musical experience. Her book, *The Study of Music Made Easy: Musical Truth*, is one of the earliest known music theory texts written by a woman (Wright, Floyd, and Southern 1992, 392). Nellie Brown-Mitchell, concert singer and teacher, created the *Phoneterion*. This device was created to help her students relax the muscles in their throat to create a pure sound (Ibid.).

Amelia Tilghman, a singer and conductor, is most known for publishing the first Black music magazine, *The Musical Messenger*. The magazine was published in Alabama in 1886. The purpose of the magazine was to promote African-American classical music. The magazine was only in print for four years (Wright 1984, 20). In *New Perspectives in Music: Essays in Honor of Eileen Southern* (1992), Josephine Wright discusses Black women during the nineteenth century as patrons of the arts. Josephine St. Pierre and Florida Ridley were patrons of the arts. Many women's clubs during the nineteenth century donated to the arts. The African-American Female

Intelligence Society, founded in 1832, was Boston's first organization solely for Black women. Black women began to create organizations that contributed to education, the arts, and the uplift of the community (374).

2.7 Roles of Black Women from the 19th Century through the 20th Century

Black women often experienced racism and sexism during the nineteenth century. Because of the widespread notions of gender roles, Black women were excluded from pursuing certain occupations. Although they were hired in some spaces, they were not given leadership roles in those spaces. During the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, it would have been highly unlikely for Black women to pursue careers as music managers, instrumentalists, or composers. These fields were dominated by men. In *“As Large as She Can Make It”: The Role of Black Women Activists in Music, 1880-1945* (1997), Doris McGinty discusses how the movement of racial uplift that was happening in the late nineteenth century gave Black women the opportunity to pursue other careers in music (215). The ideals put forth by Northern Blacks who were trying to elevate the race decided that no progression would be made if women were not allowed to get an education (Wright 1984, 18). In *The Negro Church in America* (1964), E. Franklin Frazier discusses the relationships that Northern Blacks had with Northern whites. He asserts that the Quakers also encouraged Northern Blacks to get an education (29). Many of the early concert singers were adopted by Quakers and given the opportunity to study classical music (Southern 1997, 244).

In *We Are Your Sisters: Black Women in the Nineteenth Century* (1984), Dorothy Sterling discusses the roles of African-American women throughout the 19th century. She uses letters and other primary sources to give a thorough examination of their experiences. She includes letters written by women that sang with the Fisk Jubilee Singers. *What a Woman Ought to Be and to*

Do: Black Professional Women Workers During the Jim Crow Era (1996) by Stephanie Shaw examines how young Black women were socialized during the Jim Crow Era. She discusses how they were taught to behave and how to navigate racism and discrimination.

2.8 Critical Studies of African-Americans in classical music

The most comprehensive study of African-Americans in all genres of music including classical music is Eileen Southern's *The Music of Black Americans: A History* (1997). Southern's text provides the history of African-Americans in music from 1619-1996. Southern gives an overall view of historical events paired with musical events and how the musical landscape of African-Americans in America evolved. Raoul Abdul also compiled a survey of African-Americans in classical music with his work, *Blacks in Classical Music* (1977). Abdul's text is a personal history and much of it is based on his remembering of events. Wallace Cheatham has published several works that examine race in opera. The first, *Dialogues on Opera and the African-American Experience* (1997), includes nine interviews with African-American opera professionals ranging from choreographers, composers, conductors, and singers. He asks the interviewees specific questions about race and how problems or setbacks occur in the field. The second, an article entitled "African-American Women Singers at the Metropolitan Opera before Leontyne Price" (1999), discusses the time that Marian Anderson, Gloria Davy, and Mattiwilda Dobbs spent at the Metropolitan Opera and how they opened the doors for a new generation of singers.

2.9 Gaps in the Literature

Although there has been much research done on African-American sopranos of the 20th century, little of the research has been done on Mattiwilda Dobbs. In 1968, Ernest Dunbar wrote *The Black Expatriate: A Study of American Negroes in Exile*. In the book, Dunbar interviewed

Dobbs about her experience traveling to Europe and ultimately making Sweden her home. Ann H. M. Estill wrote a dissertation entitled, *The Contributions of Selected Afro-American Women Classical Singers: 1850-1955* (1981), in which Dobbs was one of the singers she selected and interviewed. In this dissertation, Estill includes a brief biography of Dobbs and then examines how all of the singers combined have shaped the world of opera. In *American Opera Singers and Their Recordings: Critical Commentaries and Discographies* (2004), Clyde T. McCants critiques and analyzes each of the recordings that Dobbs made and presents her discography. All of the other scholarship written about Dobbs is purely biographical in nature.

2.10 Significance

The research that has been done on 20th century Black women classical musicians has had a primary focus on Black vocalists after Mattiwilda Dobbs. Dobbs opened doors for many who would come after her, so it is important to understand her experience and how it shaped the world of opera for African-Americans. Also, an area that has been understudied is how race, class, and gender affected the lives of Black women classical musicians in the 20th century. If we could understand this, we could better comprehend the multidimensionality of their experiences and how that led them to choose certain careers. Understanding their experiences can also allow us to realize how certain ideas about Black women classical musicians in the 20th century have been carried into today's classical music society.

3 METHODOLOGY

Research Question: How did race, class, and gender affect Mattiwilda Dobbs's career and personal life? Did race, class, or gender affect her decision making? How did her career choice affect her outlook on life as an African-American? How does Mattiwilda Dobbs's experience fit into the broader experience of African-American opera singers?

To understand how race, class, and gender affected Mattiwilda Dobbs's career and personal life, the author examined biographical and autobiographical texts, newspaper and magazine articles, letters, and other sources. The texts that were analyzed are from or about Mattiwilda Dobbs. For this thesis, the author examined her interviews on Black classical music and musicians. In the interviews, she discussed issues faced by Black classical musicians, issues within Black music education, as well as racism in the United States during her lifetime.

The process consisted of a textual analysis of the primary sources, the historical contextualization of those sources and other secondary sources, and the interpretation of the primary sources through the intersections of race, class, and gender. During the textual analysis phase, the author identified and analyzed the texts for specific ideas about race, class, or gender. The purpose of this phase was to understand the content in each of the texts to be able to interpret and analyze them. The next step was establishing a historical context which gives a more complete understanding of the time period. It also provides context for the spaces that Black women classical musicians and patrons occupied. Understanding the historical context is important because the social and cultural ideals of any time period are significant when making career choices and understanding the limits placed on women in certain spaces.

The final phase was analyzing and interpreting the data through the theory of intersectionality. An essential component of intersectionality is that identities are not divided into

segments and women of color do not experience racism, classism, and sexism as separate oppressions (Crenshaw 1991, 1244). In Black feminist thought, this is called the “matrix of domination.” In *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (2000), Hill-Collins describes the “matrix of domination” as the “overall social organization within which intersecting oppressions originate, develop, and are contained” (227-228).

Using the theory of intersectionality, the author connected the texts to understand how the experiences of Black women classical musicians and Mattiwilda Dobbs were affected by race, class, and gender and how those experiences led them to choose certain career paths. The author looked at the life of Mattiwilda Dobbs to understand how her personal experiences gave way to a career in classical music and how a differentiation in class affected her career. To understand how race affected Black women’s careers, the author looked at different texts that discussed race and the discrimination that faced Black women during the late 19th century into the 20th century. By understanding the historical context and the data, the author was able to analyze how gender roles and stereotypes affected Mattiwilda Dobbs.

The author chose this three-step approach because textual analysis helps to understand the content of the primary sources and the different interpretations that might come from an analysis of those sources. The historical context helps to provide an understanding of the experience of Black women classical musicians during the 20th century. The historical context places the data in a specific space and time and the data is dependent upon that space and time. Looking at how race, class, and gender converge to influence the experiences of Black women classical musicians, specifically Mattiwilda Dobbs, during the 20th century will yield a deeper

understanding of those experiences. It will also provide an understanding of the career choices of those Black women classical musicians.

3.1 Conclusion

This study seeks to examine how race, class, and gender affected Mattiwilda Dobbs's personal and professional life. The results of this study contribute to the understanding of the multilayered experiences of Black women classical musicians in their personal and professional lives during the 20th century. It also adds to the discussion of African-American opera singers and how they navigate their Blackness in their performances.

4 THE EARLY 20TH CENTURY: AFRICAN-AMERICAN MUSICIANS AND OPERA BEFORE DOBBS

The purpose of this chapter is to understand what events had taken place before and during the time Mattiwilda Dobbs emerges onto the opera stage. This chapter outlines the landscape of classical music in the United States, and the history of the Metropolitan Opera, and African-Americans and African-Americans in music during the early twentieth century. Specifically, this chapter looks at African-American concert and opera singers prior to and through Dobbs's career and how some of the barriers of discrimination were broken down by different singers. The accomplishments in the world of opera for African-Americans are also discussed.

4.1 Classical music in America

At the beginning of the twentieth century, European classical music had begun to move away from German romantic music and begun to explore each country's own national music. More opportunities for people to study music had arisen. From 1921-1923, three music schools had opened in New York and Pennsylvania. The schools were the Eastman School of Music in New York, the Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia, and the Juilliard Graduate School in New York. These schools offered Americans the same structure, conditions, and training that would have been achieved in European conservatories (Southern 1997, 406-407).

Each school became known for an aspect of classical music. The Eastman School of Music became known for composition, with Howard Hanson as its director. The Curtis Institute of Music and the Juilliard Graduate School became known for preparing musicians to have careers in music concerts and operas. Throughout the twentieth century, many African-American musicians attended these schools. During this time, there was also a push to promote American

music by American composers. The Society for the Publication of American music was established in 1919. The International Composers' Guild and the League of Composers were organizations that were established to perform classical music by American composers but also to commission new works by American composers. The League of Composers published a periodical entitled *Modern Music*. The leadership of American symphony orchestras also aided the agenda to push classical music by American composers. In 1912, Leopold Stokowski became the conductor of the Philadelphia Orchestra. In 1924, Serge Koussevitsky became the conductor of the Boston Symphony and Arturo Toscanini became the conductor of the New York Philharmonic in 1926 (Southern 1997, 407).

4.2 Opera (History of the Metropolitan Opera)

During the early twentieth century, American classical music was performed mostly through the symphony orchestra. Unlike Europe in which opera houses and opera performances were a significant part in their classical music culture. Opera in America had become institutionalized at the Metropolitan Opera. At this time, the Metropolitan Opera favored virtuosic, extravagant performances that favored its singers (Horowitz 2005, 358).

Those in attendance at the Metropolitan Opera House performance sitting in the box seats were viewed as having a higher-class status. It was a luxury to attend a Met performance because most of the operas that were rendered were not in English. Thus, it was viewed as a thrill to see an opera in another language. Their programming of well-known operas was to bring popular singers of the day to the Metropolitan Opera House (Horowitz 2005, 359). The Metropolitan Opera House saw a decline in financial support following the stock market crash in 1929 and which led to most of their support coming from patrons who did not sit in box seats. Those who had once occupied box seats withdrew their memberships from the Met leaving them with a huge

deficit. It was through radio broadcasts and funding that the Met could continue their performances (Horowitz 2005, 363-364).

4.3 African-Americans and African-American Music

Theodore Drury (1867-1943), an African-American classical singer, started his own opera company in 1900, the Drury Grand Opera Company in New York City. The opening of this opera company gave African-American opera singers a chance to perform. Because Drury could not keep full casts of African-American singers, he hired white singers. This was one of the earliest instances of Black and white singers performing opera on the same stage. The critics of the day did not enjoy seeing Black and white performers on stage together and they encouraged the company to darken the white singers' skin, instead of the expected reaction of wanting the productions to cease. The company produced shows until 1907 (Turner 2015, 346-347).

Black organizations and newspapers were also founded in the early twentieth century. The purpose of the organizations and newspaper companies was to inform African-Americans about political and social events and also to promote the ideas of racial uplift. In 1901, the *Guardian* newspaper was founded in Boston and the *Chicago Defender* was founded in 1905. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) was created in 1909. Racial uplift, in regards to classical music, included many factors. One of them was attending concerts and recitals. Some African-Americans believed that attending performances of classical music was a part of cultivating a sense of sophistication and refinement and it also delineated class status among African-Americans. Another factor was studying classical music and becoming fluent in the performance of the voice or an instrument. Participating in the

performance of classical music in these ways was essential for African-Americans to create their refined, sophisticated social identities (Turner 2015, 323-325).

Although a segment of the population of African-Americans wanted to embrace classical music, another market was opening for African-Americans. In 1920, the labeling of African-American music as “race records” began. The first known recording of an African-American woman singing happened in 1920 and that singer was Mamie Smith (1883-1946). It was her recording of the songs, *Crazy Blues* and *It’s Right Here for You* that started the labeling of African-American songs as “race records.” This started with the Okeh record label as a descriptor to distinguish between their recordings of African-American music and other music recorded by white Americans. The white-owned radio stations also used this term to make this distinction. Because there had not been a significant recording history by African-Americans before 1920, Okeh realized that there was a market for African-American music and as a result “race records” were created (Southern 1997, 369-370).

The first African-American record company was founded in 1921, the Pace Phonograph Company along with its Black Swan label. In 1925, the John Simon Guggenheim Foundation fellowships were created for the arts and awarded to Americans and all races were eligible to win the awards. The Schomburg Collection of Literature and History was created as a part of the New York public library system in 1926. The library branch was later renamed Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture in 1980. The Rodman Wanamaker Composition competition for African-American composers was created in 1927. A “Black-music survey” recital was performed at Carnegie Hall in New York in 1928. The recital featured many genres of music and included performers like W. C. Handy’s Orchestra and Jubilee Singers. *Hallelujah*, the first all-black musical film was released in 1929 and directed by King Vidor. In 1931, the

Rochester Philharmonic Orchestra (now New York Philharmonic Orchestra) performed William Grant-Still's *Afro-American Symphony*. This was the first nationally-recognized orchestra to play a symphony composed by an African-American (Southern 1997, 432-433). Following the New York Philharmonic Orchestra, the Chicago Symphony Orchestra performed Florence Price's *Symphony in E minor* in 1933. Also in 1933, Hall Johnson's *Run Little Children* premiered on Broadway. This was the first time an African-American folk opera written by an African-American was performed on Broadway. William Dawson's *Negro Folk Symphony* was premiered by Leopold Stokowski and the Philadelphia Orchestra in 1934 (Ibid., 361).

After the Great Depression, the Works Progress Administration (WPA) was created in 1935. The WPA was particularly helpful in giving Black musicians and Black artists the opportunity to perform and participate in activities in the community. Orchestras and choral ensembles were created and these ensembles often performed music that was composed by American composers (Southern 1997, 407).

In 1935, Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess* premiered with an all-black cast on Broadway. The National Negro Congress was established in 1936 with 500 African-American organizations. In 1937, the Southern Youth Negro Congress was created. In 1941, World War II starts and the Second Great Migration begins. There had been many attempts by African-Americans to produce operas and to create opera companies, the first would be created in 1941. Mary Cardwell Dawson created the National Negro Opera Company in Pittsburgh. It was the first African-American opera company in the United States and operated from 1941-1962. The Congress of Racial Equality was founded in 1942. Todd Duncan, African-American baritone, sang with the New York City Opera in 1945. This was the first time an African-American singer had sung with a well-known opera company. Camilla Williams would sing with the New York City Opera the

following year. In 1949, the New York City Opera would put on a production of William Grant Still's *Troubled Island* (1941). This was the first production of an opera written by an African-American in a leading opera company (Southern 1997, 433). Also in 1949, the term "race records" was changed to rhythm and blues in the music industry. The premiere of Clarence Cameron White's opera *Ouanga* was given by the Harry T. Burleigh Association in Indiana in 1949 (Ibid., 529). In 1951, William Warfield and Muriel Rahn appeared on the Ed Sullivan Show. This was the first time that African-American concert singers appeared on television. Marian Anderson would appear on the show in 1952 (Ibid., 361-362).

Black musicians were able to get opportunities to study and perform with several organizations and foundations such as the Metropolitan Opera, the Walter Naumburg Musical Foundation Award, and the Guggenheim Foundation Fellowship. Studying music abroad was still an option for African-American musicians. By this time, many musicians would travel to France to study with Nadia Boulanger who was a French composer and teacher. Many people began study with her because she had a history of helping to shape students' talents without erasing their uniqueness (Southern 1997, 407).

Concert singers also found that there were more opportunities in operatic performance in Europe rather than America. Many of the singers would pursue careers in Europe and then return to the United States to tour and perform. There were many developments in the music scene of America that also helped Black musicians to develop their careers. African-American classical musicians often competed in competitions and participated in local singing groups and church choirs. Black churches and Black colleges often helped young aspiring musicians to pursue their goals of having careers in classical music. Black churches often held fundraisers to help support young Black musicians but they also financed concerts and recitals (Southern 1997, 407-408).

Likewise, the local communities surrounding Black colleges helped to fund young Black musicians' study abroad. Black musicians who had already had careers in music were employed as professors at Black colleges. For Black music professors, the opportunity to teach in a college meant access to ensembles and choirs. This was beneficial to Black music professors who specialized in composition because they had the opportunity to write for ensemble and have it performed (Southern 1997, 408).

Black classical musicians who had successful careers during the Harlem Renaissance were viewed as a symbol of achievement for Black people. When Black classical musicians performed for white audiences, it was said that they broke the racial barrier. It showed white people that Black musicians were not only talented but also could compete in the field. Once Black musicians gained initial success, other Black musicians would follow. Black concert singers opened the door for Black musicians to have careers internationally. Throughout history, Black concert singers did not receive as much prejudice as instrumentalists faced. This would also hold true for the 1920s (Southern 1997, 408-409).

Lyric tenor, Roland Hayes (1887-1976) became the first African-American classical singer to obtain international recognition. He received musical training at Fisk University in Nashville and joined the Fisk Jubilee Singers in 1911. In the early days of his career, he was not very successful. He organized his recitals and accepted every invitation to sing in front of an audience. Although his debut recital received favorable reviews, he received only a small amount of support from the general public. He then went to study in London in 1920. Shortly after his debut in London, he was invited to sing for King George V in 1921. He became well-known as a singer in Europe having performed many recitals. When he returned from Europe, he achieved much success in the United States (Southern 1997, 409-410).

Contralto, Marian Anderson (1902-1993) would follow Hayes in reaching international notoriety. During the 1950s, she would become a musical representative of Blackness and Americanness in the United States and abroad. Through her performances, she was able to state her personal opinion on politics (Fosler-Lussier 2015, 101-102; 120-121). In 1957, Anderson was about to journey to tour in Asia when an incident occurred in Little Rock, Arkansas. Nine African-American students tried to enter a high school that had been all-white. The governor of Arkansas, Orval Faubus, sent in the National Guard to keep the students from entering. The students were met with violence outside of the school building. President Eisenhower then federalized the National Guard and instructed them to escort the students into the school building (Davis 1998, 133-135).

After another internationally-known musician, Louis Armstrong said that he would not perform in Arkansas because of Governor Faubus, Anderson responded differently. When asked the same question, she said that she would do it, if it was for the overall benefit of the people. In 1957, "The Lady from Philadelphia" aired on television. This broadcast featured Marian Anderson on tour in Asia. During this time, racial tensions in the United States were very high. On this broadcast, Marian Anderson spoke to young Thailand students and Thailand's prime minister about race and Christianity (Fosler-Lussier 2015, 109-111).

Her statements about the oppression of Black people were that through faith and a belief in God, Black people would be free eventually. The reviews of this broadcast were mostly positive. White audiences said that it helped them to fully understand the struggles of Black people in the United States and that the broadcast could be used to educate others. It has been argued that white audiences responded so positively to Anderson's broadcast because Anderson

had adopted middle-class values in regards to how one should present oneself to others (Fosler-Lussier 2015, 113-114).

Because of this, many people thought that the broadcast meant more than diplomacy. It was a break from the news coverage about the Little Rock nine and the space race, so to some people Anderson presented an alternative way to show the people of the United States (Fosler-Lussier 2015, 115). While some argued that what Anderson represented was positive, others thought that her remarks worked against her in the fight for civil rights. Some scholars have viewed her position as assimilationist because of a combination of narrative and the politics of respectability (Ibid., 119-120). After her tour of South Asia in 1957, she became a delegate to the United Nations on behalf of the United States. In regards to her career, by 1941, she was one of the most prolific concert singers in the United States. In January of 1955, Anderson made her debut at the Metropolitan Opera singing the role of Ulrica in Verdi's *Un ballo in maschera*. She was the first African-American to sing at the Metropolitan Opera (Southern 1997, 412).

Paul Robeson (1898-1976), an African-American bass-baritone, emerged in 1925 with his debut recital at the Greenwich Village Theater in New York. In this performance, he sang only Negro spirituals. This was the first recital in which a singer only sang Negro spirituals. He performed in musicals and musical films and for the next thirty-five years he would tour performing Negro spirituals and folk songs. Robeson was cast as Joe in a production of *Show Boat* in London in 1928. He was also heavily involved in activism. He spoke out against injustice in interviews and through music. In 1939, *Ballad for Americans* was first performed through a radio broadcast by Robeson. The song discusses the beginning of slavery and discrimination in the United States (Southern 1997, 413-414; Redmond 2016, 616-617). Because Robeson was

vocal about injustice in the United States, his passport was revoked by the United States government (Kelley & Lewis 2000, 175-176).

There were many African-American singers who would emerge after Anderson and Robeson. Dorothy Maynor (1910-1996) was a soprano who graduated from Hampton Institute. After Serge Koussevitsky heard her sing in 1939, he helped her to reach new levels in her career. She performed at Harry Truman's Inaugural Ball in 1949 and at Dwight Eisenhower's Inaugural Ceremony in 1953. Soprano, Lillian Evanti (1890-1967) was among the first African-Americans to perform opera in Europe. Evanti sang the role of Lakmé in Delibes' *Lakmé* in Nice, France in 1927. Soprano, Camilla Williams (1922-2012) was awarded the Marian Anderson Fellowship in 1943 and 1944. Her debut, discussed in a later chapter, with the New York City opera occurred in 1946 (Southern 1997, 414-417).

5 MATTIWILDA DOBBS BIOGRAPHY

Mattiwilda Dobbs was born on July 25, 1925 in Atlanta, Georgia to parents John Wesley Dobbs and Irene Dobbs. Her name was a joining of her maternal grandmother's name, Mattie Wilda Sykes. Mattiwilda Dobbs was the fifth of six girls born to John Wesley Dobbs and Irene Dobbs. Her sisters, Irene, Willie, Millicent, Josephine, and June all studied music. She began with piano lessons at the age of seven. When Dobbs would sing while practicing piano, her mother would tell her to stop and focus on her playing (Sibley 1954). Dobbs also sang in the choir at First Congregational Church in Atlanta. She also participated in children's music recitals that were sponsored by First Congregational Church. She attended Atlanta University Laboratory High School and graduated in 1942. The graduation ceremony featured five members of the class who would give speeches around the theme, "America Must Choose." Dobbs's speech was entitled, "Fascism, the Way of Slaves" (*The Atlanta Constitution*, May 29, 1942).

While she was in Atlanta, she sang at events such as voter registration drives and other political events. Her father was president of the Atlanta Civic and Political League and this organization often held meetings geared toward getting people from ages 18 to 21 to vote (*Atlanta Daily World*, October 31, 1943). During her teenage years, she began to perform around the city and become more visible as a singer. She continued music studies at Spelman College in Atlanta. She majored in music and had a minor in Spanish because she did not know if she wanted a career in music or a career in teaching. At Spelman, she studied with Willis James and Naomi Maise. Dobbs was a member of the Spelman College Glee Club as well as the Atlanta-Morehouse-Spelman Chorus. She said that her father and music professors urged her to pursue a career as a singer (Dunbar 1968, 209). She graduated from Spelman College in 1946 and following in the footsteps of three of her older sisters, was valedictorian of her class. She

traveled to New York in 1946 to pursue a degree in Spanish from Columbia University. Dobbs faced discrimination while living in New York because she was African-American. She said,

I had felt segregation more in New York than I had in the South . . . I had expected much more of the North. But you had to worry about a restaurant waiter putting you at a back table and you always wondered, 'Can I go into this restaurant?' In the South you live on your little side and you don't come into situations where you can really be hurt (Dunbar 1968, 216-217).

Although she was faced with discrimination, her career continued to blossom. In 1947, she was awarded the Marian Anderson Scholarship. During the summer of 1947, Dobbs returned to Atlanta to give recitals before she traveled to Mexico to study voice at the University of Mexico. While in Mexico, she studied Mexican folk songs and was also selected to be a soloist at an annual Fiesta sponsored by the university (*Atlanta Daily World*, December 7, 1948). In 1948, she received a scholarship to the Mannes School of Music and began studying voice with Lotte Leonard, a German soprano who specialized in singing lieder. Also in 1948, she graduated from Columbia University with a Master's degree in Spanish. In the summer of 1949, Dobbs attended the Berkshire Music Center in Tanglewood, Massachusetts. A program under the direction of Serge Koussevitzky, the conductor of the Boston Symphony Orchestra (Jones, July 3, 1949). In 1949, Dobbs gave a recital at Spelman College and her sister Irene Dobbs Jackson accompanied her on piano. At this recital, Dobbs sang five encores (Washington 1949).

After four years of study in New York, Dobbs left for Europe to study because of the difficulty of securing a manager due to her lack of experience (Dunbar 1968, 210). When Dobbs decided to depart for Europe in 1950, her plan was not to have a career in opera because in the United States she saw that African-Americans were not performing or allowed to perform at the Metropolitan Opera House. Also, most of the repertoire her voice teacher was teaching her consisted of art songs (songs composed for voice and accompaniment that are not from a staged

work like an opera), so being an opera singer was not a career that she strongly considered (Ibid., 210-211). Dobbs had attended an opera workshop on scholarship at Mannes College in New York and spent two seasons with them. She also attended an opera workshop in 1950 at Columbia University which resulted in the first performance of her career (Ibid.). It was the premiere of Langston Hughes' opera, *The Barrier*. Dobbs sang the role of Sally (Taubman 1950). Because her voice teacher in New York was German, she was taught mostly German repertoire. Thus, she wanted to move to Paris to learn French repertoire. She received the John Hay Whitney Scholarship to travel and she spent two years in Paris studying with Pierre Bernac.

In an interview with Ernest Dunbar for his work, *The Black Expatriates: A Study of American Negroes in Exile* (1968), Dobbs revealed that she moved to Paris because Europeans were more likely to give an unfamiliar face a chance to start a career (211). She said that at the time she was beginning her career there were many opportunities for African-American singers in solo concert performance but not on the opera stage. In the United States, Dobbs said that in the early 1950s opera was closed to African-Americans and she had not known of any African-Americans singing opera in Europe. She had met with managers in New York and Paris and they told her that they would not be able to help her (Ibid., 212).

She performed at the Geneva Conservatory of Music's International Competition in Switzerland in 1951. Although her ankle was sprained badly before the competition, she went through with the performance and won the first prize. She sang "Ach, Ich Liebe" from Mozart's *Die Entführung aus dem Serail*, K. 384 (*The Abduction from the Seraglio*). Before she won the competition, Dobbs used some of her scholarship money to sponsor her own recital. She booked The Hague, a small performance venue in Holland, and performed and received positive reviews.

While in Holland in 1951, Dobbs sang for the director of the Holland Festival. The next year he would offer her a lead role in their upcoming opera production (Dunbar 1968, 212-213).

After she won first prize in the Geneva Conservatory of Music's International Competition the previous year, a manager booked a couple of concerts for her with an orchestra. Her first European concert was sponsored by churches in England and the United States. As a result of her audition with the director of the Holland Festival, she sang the role of the Nightingale in Igor Stravinsky's *The Nightingale* at their 1952 festival. This performance was the first operatic performance of her career (Dunbar 1968, 212-213). In 1952, Dobbs recorded Georges Bizet's *Les pêcheurs de perles* (*The Pearl Fishers*) with the Paris Philharmonic Orchestra in which she sang the role of Leïla (McCants 2004, 53-55). On November 14, 1952, Dobbs performed at Jackson College (now Jackson State University) in the college's Lyceum series.

Also, following the competition, Dobbs was invited to perform Handel's *Messiah* in Paris. Because of her winning the Geneva Competition, she was also asked to perform at Teatro alla Scala (La Scala), one of Italy's opera houses. Many of the most well-known operas in the world have been premiered at La Scala such as Puccini's *Turandot* (Abbate and Parker 2012, 519). The letter from the opera house came at the perfect time because after a few months without communication, Dobbs was scheduled to return to Atlanta. Dobbs was the first African-American singer to perform at La Scala. Her debut performance on March 4, 1953 was Elvira in Gioachino Rossini's *L'italiana in Algeri* (*The Atlanta Constitution*, March 1, 1953).

After her performance at La Scala in 1953, her career took off. She received a substantial amount of coverage in the press in the United States and in Europe. Dobbs sang with the Conservatoire Orchestra at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées. She received more than 5 curtain

calls at the conclusion of the concert (*The Atlanta Constitution*, March 29, 1953). Also in April of 1953, Dobbs married Luis Rodriguez in Genoa, Italy. She met Rodriguez in Paris while he was studying law at the Sorbonne (also known as the University of Paris) and she was studying voice with Pierre Bernac. Rodriguez, a Spaniard, was having difficulty learning French and Dobbs, being an opera singer who had learned French and had a degree in Spanish, agreed to assist him. Once she began helping him, they fell in love. Although they met in 1952, Dobbs's father asked that they wait a year before marriage which accounts for their marriage in 1953. He wanted Dobbs to be sure that she was making the proper decision in marrying Rodriguez (Murdock 1954).

Dobbs performed at the Glyndebourne Festival in June and July of 1953. She sang the role of Zerbinetta in Strauss' *Ariadne auf Naxos*. The press in London said that she was "a second Lily Pons"—who was a French coloratura soprano with a successful career in opera and film (Gilderdale 1953). Cecil Smith for the *Daily Express* said, "I hardly think we need to look further for a coloratura soprano to be the successor to Lily Pons. Will Covent Garden engage her? And in her own country, will the Metropolitan Opera lift its 70 years' colour ban?" (June 25, 1953). *Jet* magazine featured Mattiwilda Dobbs on the cover of their magazine in October of 1953 with the headline "Opera's Most Promising Negro Voice." In December of 1953, Dobbs performed at the Theatre de La Monnaie in Brussels, Belgium in a production of Léo Delibes' *Lakmé* in which she sang the role of Lakmé.

In 1954, Dobbs met manager Sol Hurok and signed a contract with him. Dobbs made sure that the contract specified that she would not perform in front of segregated audiences (Berheimer 2007, 15). Because she made that rule, most of her performances in the South were

at Spelman College, Clark Atlanta University, African-American churches or other Historically Black Colleges and Universities on her tours.

One of Hurok's goals was to make sure that Dobbs was offered an opportunity to sing at the Metropolitan Opera House. The *Chicago Defender* reported, "It is rumored in high circles that she is being groomed to be the next Negro who will be signed by the Metropolitan Opera co., and will be engaged to do a number of roles" (De Mille 1955). She then returned to the United States and gave her debut recital at Town Hall in New York (Dunbar 1968, 213). She reprised the role of Zerbinetta with the Little Orchestra Society. Dobbs was scheduled to sing on the Ed Sullivan Show on February 21, 1954. She became ill and was unable to make the performance (*Atlanta Daily World*, February 21, 1954). Hurok arranged for her to give a performance at the War Memorial Auditorium in Nashville, Tennessee on March 15, 1954. This recital was sponsored by the J. A. Henry Consistory No. 48, Prince Hall Masonic Affiliation.

As a result of her successes, Dobbs was asked to perform at Covent Garden, England's Royal Opera House during their 1953-1954 season. She sang the roles of Gilda in Giuseppe Verdi's *Rigoletto*, Tsaritsa of Shemakha (Queen of Shemakha) in Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov's *Zolotoi Petushok* (*Le Coq d'Or* or *The Golden Cockerel*), Olympia in Offenbach's *Les Contes d'Hoffman* (*The Tales of Hoffman*) and Waldvogel in Richard Wagner's *Siegfried*, WWV 86C from the larger work, *Der Ring des Nibelungen* (*The Ring of the Nibelung*), WWV 86.

On June 22, 1954, Luis Rodriguez died from liver complications. Rodriguez and Dobbs were only married for fourteen months. A few days before his death, Dobbs was in rehearsal for her role in Rimsky-Korsakov's *The Golden Cockerel*. She was called out of rehearsal to be by his side. Dobbs was scheduled to perform for King Gustav II and Queen Louise of Sweden, Queen Elizabeth II of England and the Duke of Edinburgh of Scotland on June 30, 1954 in

Covent Garden. Although her husband had just died, she kept her commitment and performed for the Royal Family at Covent Garden. Following the performance at Covent Garden honoring King Gustav II and Queen Louise of Sweden, Dobbs was awarded the Order of the North Star by the King of Sweden. Dobbs was the first African-American woman to sing at Covent Garden and African-American newspapers made sure to capture the moment for their readers with headlines like, “For the first time in history a colored American soprano is starring in opera at historic Covent Garden” (*Chicago Defender*, February 6, 1954).

In July of 1954, Dobbs released a collection of songs on LP through Angel Records titled *Song Recital*. The LP included the texts of each song (*Atlanta Daily World*, July 6, 1954). In December of the same year, *Mademoiselle* magazine honored Dobbs. She was given one of ten awards that were given to people who had made significant strides in their fields and continued to thrive (*Atlanta Daily World*, December 18, 1954). On January 1, 1955, Dobbs performed at an Emancipation Day celebration at Wheat Street Baptist Church in Atlanta. The keynote speaker for the celebration was Thurgood Marshall. Marshall, a civil rights lawyer, successfully argued the *Brown v. Board of Education* case, in 1954, in which the Supreme Court found that the segregation of public schools was unconstitutional (*Atlanta Daily World*, January 1, 1955). One of the stops on her tour was Livingstone College on February 21, 1955. She gave a recital in the college’s Lyceum Series. Her first world tour included 46 concerts in Australia (*Chicago Defender*, March 12, 1955). The tour ended with a debut at the San Francisco Opera in 1955 in the role of the Queen of Shemakha from *The Golden Cockerel*. Dobbs was the first African-American woman to perform in a lead role at the San Francisco Opera.

In 1956, Dobbs returned to the Glyndebourne Festival and sang the roles of The Queen of the Night in Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart’s *Die Zauberflöte* (*The Magic Flute*), K. 620 and

Konstanze in Mozart's *Die Entführung aus dem Serail* K. 384 (*The Abduction from the Seraglio*). She made her debut at the Metropolitan Opera in New York on November 9, 1956. She sang the role of Gilda from Verdi's *Rigoletto* and received positive reviews from critics about the performance. *New York Times* critic Howard Taubman said, "The day is not far off when an artist's color or race will not require special emphasis. But Miss Dobbs is one of the history makers. . . the third Negro to become a principal singer in the theater where for seven decades none had been welcomed, though there had been worthy candidates" (November 10, 1956). Robert Coleman for the *Daily Mirror* wrote, "Knowing the importance of the debut to her people, the Georgia-born and-trained singer must have been more than a little nervous. But she didn't show it" (November 10, 1956). Her father, John Wesley Dobbs and mother, Irene Dobbs attended this performance as well as four of her five sisters, June, Willie, Millicent, and Josephine (Beckley 1956). Dobbs was the first African-American leading lady at the Metropolitan Opera. This was a significant performance because it opened the door for African-American women to be imagined and cast as romantic love interests at the Metropolitan Opera, in the United States, and internationally.

Dobbs was the third African-American singer to sing at the Metropolitan Opera. Marian Anderson was the first African-American singer to perform there in January of 1955. Anderson sang the role of Ulrica in Giuseppe Verdi's *Un Ballo in Maschera* (*A Masked Ball*). Dobbs was in the audience for this performance. She felt that Anderson's debut, although an accomplishment, was ill-timed in that her voice had passed its prime (Bernheimer 2007, 12). Anderson's debut happened towards the end of her career. The second African-American to perform at the Metropolitan Opera was Robert McFerrin. He was the first African-American to win "Auditions of the Air," the Metropolitan Opera's annual singing competition. For his debut

performance, he sang the role of Amonasro in Verdi's *Aida*. Marian Anderson's debut was on January 7, 1955 and Robert McFerrin's debut was on January 27, 1955 (Southern 1997, 530; *Opera News* 2007).

Dobbs spent eight seasons at the Metropolitan Opera and gave twenty-nine performances. In December of 1956, she gave a recital at Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee. On December 11, 1956, she returned to Atlanta to give a recital at Wheat Street Baptist Church. She also appeared on the Ed Sullivan Show in January of 1957. This was her last performance in the United States before traveling to Europe and South America to perform (*Atlanta Daily World*, January 19, 1957). Dobbs also sang with the Israel Philharmonic in Tel Aviv, Israel in April of 1957. She was the first American to travel to the Middle East since the United States had removed the travel ban. The travel ban that was lifted barred American Jewish people from traveling to Israel, a majority Jewish country (*New York Times*, April 9, 1957).

On October 24, 1957, Dobbs gave a recital at Texas Southern University in Houston. On December 21, 1957, she sang Lucia in Gaetano Donizetti's *Lucia di Lammermoor* at the Metropolitan Opera. She received seven curtain calls for her performance (*New York Times*, December 23, 1957). Two days later on December 23, 1957, she would marry Bengt Janzon at Grace Congregational Church in New York City. At the time, Janzon worked for the Royal Swedish Opera as the director of public relations. He also worked as a journalist. Janzon and Dobbs met the seventh time that Dobbs had visited Scandinavia (*Opera News*, March 31, 1958, 9). Upon marrying Janzon, Dobbs would move to Sweden from Madrid, where she had been living since the early 1950s. On February 4, 1958, she gave a recital in Bennett College's Lyceum Series. In October and December 1958, she sang the role of Olympia in Jacques Offenbach's *Les Contes d'Hoffman* (*The Tales of Hoffman*) at the Metropolitan Opera House.

She also recorded *Les Contes d'Hoffman* (*The Tales of Hoffman*) with the Chorus and Orchestra of Concerts de Paris in 1958. She sang the roles of Olympia and Antonia (McCants 2004, 54-55).

Dobbs gave an outdoor concert in Stockholm, Sweden in November of 1958. More than 40,000 people attended, breaking Sweden's record for the largest gathering at an outdoor concert (*Opera News*, November 10, 1958). In January of 1959, she was featured in *Vogue Magazine* in their "Vogue's Spotlight" section and was pictured in the costume for her role as Gilda in *Rigoletto*. The caption read, "Mattiwilda Dobbs, a brainy coloratura whose voice has a supple, extraordinarily rich timbre, sang her first role at the Metropolitan Opera House this season—a full-toned Gilda in *Rigoletto*."

She went on a three-week tour of the Soviet Union in 1959. The American-Soviet cultural exchange program sponsored these concerts. Over a period of three weeks, she gave two concerts in Kiev, Ukraine, three concerts in Moscow, Russia, and two concerts in Saint Petersburg, Russia (formerly known as Leningrad). In Moscow, she sang the role of Rosina in Gioachino Rossini's *Il barbiere di Siviglia* (*The Barber of Seville*) at the Bolshoi Filial Theater. Dobbs sang the lead part in Italian and the rest of the performers sang in Russian. This performance was televised. For another performance in her Soviet Union tour, she sang the role of Gilda from *Rigoletto* (*New York Times*, December 7, 1959). Also in 1959, Big Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church and Wheat Street Baptist Church organized a performance for Dobbs in Atlanta. The recital was performed at Wheat Street Baptist Church on March 1st.

The alumnae chapter of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc. and the West Virginia State College organized Dobbs's recital at West Virginia State College on February 14, 1960. On February 6, 1961, Dobbs gave a recital at Florida Agricultural and Mechanical University. In March of 1961, she returned to her alma mater, Spelman College to give a recital. Dobbs had

formally moved to Stockholm, Sweden and would live there for most of her career. On April 9, 1961, she gave a recital at the Royal Festival Hall in London. Virginia State College sponsored artist recitals and Dobbs performed at the college on March 5, 1962. During the 1960s, she continued touring colleges in the United States. Dobbs gave a recital at Central State College in Wilberforce, Ohio on March 24, 1963, and another at Alabama Agricultural and Mechanical College in Normal, Alabama on November 18, 1963. At Dillard University in New Orleans, Louisiana on December 7, 1964, Dobbs presented the fourth concert in Dillard's Lyceum Series. At the colleges and universities in which Dobbs performed, she often gave masterclasses to students in order to help them improve aspects of their performances.

Dobbs felt that the atmosphere of the Metropolitan Opera was highly competitive and often times chaotic. She did state that she enjoyed the ease of European establishments. Remembering her time at the Met she said, "They were exciting years, but what a madhouse. There were so many people, you had to fight for roles. The atmosphere was always hysterical. Whenever you got on stage it was a matter of life and death" (Nazzaro 1973). She later said that she decided to leave the Met because she did not have consistent opportunities to perform (Bernheimer 2007, 14). During the 1967-1968 season, Dobbs recorded Mozart's *Die Entführung aus dem Serail* K. 384 (*The Abduction from the Seraglio*) with the Ambrosian Singers and the Bath Festival Orchestra in which she sang the role of Konstanze (McCants 2004, 54-55).

In January of 1968, Dobbs gave a recital at Savannah State College (now Savannah State University). On April 10, 1968, Dobbs gave a recital in the Patkar Hall in Bombay, India. This performance was sponsored by the United States Information Service and The Bombay Madrigal Singers' Organization. She sang the spiritual "A City Called Heaven." She dedicated this performance to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. as he was assassinated six days prior and the two had

been friends since childhood (*The Indian Express*, April 11, 1968). There was also a memorial held for Dr. King in which Dobbs was asked to sing because she was already in the city for the recital performance. She sang, “A City Called Heaven” (*The Times of India*, April 10, 1968). Dobbs always performed this spiritual unaccompanied. Its text is about longing to go to Heaven and to end a sorrowful life on Earth. When Dobbs sang this spiritual, it always had a profound impact on the audience, often moving them to tears (Roosevelt 1972).

In December of 1968, Dobbs was invited back to her hometown to sing the role of Mussetta in Giacomo Puccini’s *La bohème*. This would be her first operatic performance in Atlanta, Georgia. In an interview for the *Atlanta Journal and Constitution* in 1968, Dobbs said that she felt that this performance was special because of integration. It was held at the Atlanta Memorial Arts Center. Dobbs recalled going to shows at the center in her youth when the seating was segregated. She was overcome with emotion upon being invited to sing in Atlanta in front of an integrated audience (Sinclair 1968). On January 18, 1969, Barber-Scotia College in Concord, North Carolina hosted Dobbs at the Sauvain Auditorium at Concord Junior High School. She then traveled to Raleigh, North Carolina to give a recital at Shaw University on January 23, 1969. She was asked to perform at the university because they believed that she was representative of their philosophy which was, “We hope to bring about an awareness of the black man’s contribution to the cultural arts and to demonstrate the black man’s ability to perform” (*Shaw University Recital Program*, January 23, 1969). Although the university was recognizing Dobbs, a woman, for her contributions to the arts, their philosophy promotes gender stereotypes and biases because it does not emphasize the contributions of all Black people, men and women.

In April of 1969, Dobbs gave a recital at Sir William Whitla Hall in Belfast, Northern Ireland. The British Music Society of Northern Ireland and The Queen’s University of Belfast

sponsored this recital. On February 26, 1970, Dobbs gave a recital at the Festival of Perth in Australia (known as the Perth International Arts Festival since the year 2000). Dobbs gave a recital in the Victoria Theater in Singapore on March 4, 1970 that was sponsored by The Singapore Musical Society. The audience enjoyed her performance so much that she sang three encores (*The Malay Mail*, March 6, 1970).

In September of 1971, Dobbs gave a recital at the Edinburgh Festival in Edinburgh, Scotland. Dobbs re-entered the New York concert world in 1972, she had not performed in New York since 1964. Upon Dobbs's return, Joanne Rile became her manager. She returned in April of 1972, performing with the Jersey Schola Cantorum in Alice Tully Hall in New York City. She gave the New York premiere of František Xaver Brixi's *Missa Solemnis in D – for soloists, SATB, orchestra, and organ* (Henahan April 17, 1972). She received great reviews upon her return. A review in *Musical America* from July 1972 read, "The former Met soprano made her first New York appearance in eight years . . . and displayed a voice undimmed in its brightness, intonation, and flexibility." During September and October in 1972, Dobbs spent a few months touring Australia for the third time (*ABC Radio Guide*, September 12, 1972, 2). Her last performance was at the Festival of Perth on October 21, 1972.

In November 1972-1973, Dobbs gave a college tour in the South (Weinberg 1973, 52). In 1973, she became the first African-American to join the music faculty at the University of Texas, Austin campus. Dobbs felt that it was important for students to learn from a voice professor who still performed regularly. Although it was her first-time teaching voice students, she felt comfortable with the other faculty members because she had sung with them in Europe. Dobbs and baritone, Jess Walters had sung together at the Royal Danish Opera House in

Copenhagen, Denmark. She had also sung with tenor, Arturo Sergi at the Hamburg State Opera in Hamburg, Germany (Bustin 1973).

Dobbs sang at the Academy of Music in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania in 1973. She sang the role of Konstanze in Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's *Die Entführung aus dem Serail* K. 384 (*The Abduction from the Seraglio*) (Nazzaro 1983). In January of 1974, Dobbs sang at her nephew Maynard Jackson's Mayoral Inauguration in Atlanta (Townsend 1974). Dobbs became an honorary member of Sigma Alpha Iota International Music Fraternity Inc. in 1974 (Johnson 2016, 11). Also, in 1974, Dobbs was an artist-in-residence at Spelman College in Atlanta, Georgia for six weeks. She left Spelman College and began teaching at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. In 1976, she returned to Georgia to teach at the University of Georgia. Driving back and forth from Atlanta to Athens, proved to be challenging. She left the University of Georgia and accepted an offer from Howard University in Washington, D.C. to teach voice. She did not want to leave Atlanta but she indicated that she had no place to work (Douglas 1983). Dobbs was given the opportunity by President Jimmy Carter to sing at the ceremony to honor Marian Anderson in 1978. She sang "He's Got the Whole World in His Hands," which was a spiritual often sung by Anderson. In 1979, Dobbs received an honorary doctorate degree from Spelman College (*Atlanta Daily World* 1979).

During the 1980s and early 1990s, Dobbs still toured throughout the United States. On November 4, 1981, she performed at Tougaloo College in Mississippi. In 1983, Atlanta mayor Andrew Young declared that November 5, 1983 as "NAACP/Mattiwilda Dobbs Day." Also in 1983, the NAACP honored her. She received the James Weldon Johnson Award for her contributions to the arts for thirty-five years (Douglas 1983). On January 3, 1987, Dobbs gave a performance at Carnegie Hall to honor Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. This concert was called the

“Art of the Spiritual” and the program read, “In honor of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. We remember and we are grateful for his dream of a just and peaceful world” (*Carnegie Hall* 1987). There were three other singers featured: soprano, Lorice Stevens, tenor, Kenn Hicks, and bass-baritone, William Warfield. Each performer sang a group of spirituals. Dobbs performed “Let Us Break Bread Together,” “His Name So Sweet,” “Talk About a Child,” “Balm in Gilead,” “Witness,” “I Want Jesus to Walk with Me,” “A City Called Heaven,” “On My Journey,” and “He’s Got the Whole World in His Hands” (*Ibid.*). On April 11, 1991, Dobbs performed at Prairie View A&M University in Texas in their Performing Artists Series. In 2000, she was honored by the Arlington Chapter of Links Incorporated in Virginia and was awarded the Excellence in the Arts Achievement Award (The Arlington Chapter of Links, Inc. 2000). Mattiwilda Dobbs passed away at the age of 90 on December 8, 2015 in Atlanta, Georgia.

6 INTERSECTIONALITY: AN ANALYSIS OF THE PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL LIFE OF MATTIWILDA DOBBS

The purpose of this thesis is to understand Mattiwilda Dobbs's experience through the lens of intersectionality and how she fits into the broader tradition of African-American women classical singers. Mattiwilda Dobbs was able to garner much success throughout her career. Her image as an African-American opera singer was symbolic on many levels. For Southern African-Americans, Dobbs was seen as a standard of achievement. African-American newspapers across the country sang her praises. Because she was the first African-American to sing at La Scala in Italy, the first to sing with the San Francisco Opera, and the first African-American woman to sing a lead romantic role at the Metropolitan Opera, her Blackness became symbolic of Black excellence, success, and respectability.

Her father, John Wesley Dobbs was a prominent leader in Atlanta. John Wesley Dobbs was born in Marietta, Georgia. He attended Morehouse College and worked as a railway clerk for the United States Postal Service for thirty-two years. For his job, he traveled from Atlanta to Nashville. Because of segregation and Jim Crow laws that prohibited African-Americans from using public libraries, Dobbs would get books from Fisk University in Nashville to bring home to his daughters to read (Weinberg 1973, 52). He also required each of his daughters to receive musical instruction. Upon retirement from the Postal Service, Dobbs helped organize the Atlanta Negro Voters League (Bailey 2014).

According to Mattiwilda Dobbs, her father taught his daughters that education was one of the most important aspects of life. John Wesley Dobbs put all six of his daughters through Spelman College and they all obtained Master's degrees after their time at Spelman. Although John Wesley Dobbs put all of his daughters through college, they were not wealthy (Gulliver

1973). In Stephanie J. Shaw's *What a Woman Ought to Be and to Do* (1996), she discusses African-American women's experiences as professionals during the Jim Crow years. One important point from her text that applies to Mattiwilda Dobbs's experience is how young African-American women were raised. Shaw says that African-American parents wanted their daughters to move beyond domestic occupations and to excel in the field that they chose. Shaw continues with specific requirements that young African-American women needed to be taught. Respectability, education, responsibility to the community, and hard work are among the lessons that these women were taught. Dobbs often said in interviews that she was taught that education was the most important in success both in a professional and personal realm (Gulliver 1973). Education was viewed as a way to escape the stereotypical jobs given to African-American women. Shaw asserts,

The education process went beyond simple schooling—it imparted an orientation toward achievement. Family members supplemented formal schooling by encouraging these daughters to believe that regardless of the limitations others might impose on them because of their race, class, or sex, none of those conditions necessarily determined their abilities, and neither should race, class, or sex inhibit their aspirations (1).

Young African-American women had to behave and present themselves in a specific way. They were supposed to look neat and clean, while being careful of who they associated with. If they were seen with people participating in bad behavior, it would be assumed that they were not of the highest character and that they did not receive a proper upbringing, which their parents did not want. The young women were to exhibit good manners and never act out in public. They were always expected to be kind to people even if they were being treated poorly. They were taught at an early age to be polite and to say “please” and “thank you” when necessary. Specifically, they were never expected to respond to racism shown by white people because that might incite violence. They also hoped that it would show the aggressor their own

wrong-doings. Parents taught them that there is strength in not responding, and that it raised their self-respect. Being “well-behaved” was also looked for in college admission. Colleges wanted people, especially young women, who had integrity and did not have a questionable past (Shaw 1996, 16-21).

Young African-American women were also urged to dress modestly. Parents did not want their daughters to attract unnecessary attention from the opposite sex and parents were aware that their daughters did not have to necessarily do anything to attract unwanted attention. They just wanted to make sure that they were safe. Because the parents of these young women dressed them until they left for college, they shaped their wardrobe and style to reflect the image that they wanted to portray. They were urged to protect themselves and to not become pregnant without being married because it would limit their professional careers (Shaw 1996, 24).

Another lesson that young African-American women had to learn was how to be self-sufficient. Their parents wanted them to be able to be responsible as well as to take care of themselves, whether that be cooking, budgeting, or sewing. Although they wanted their daughters to obtain jobs outside of domestic work, young African-American women were still expected to execute domestic tasks. They had to do these tasks extremely well. The parents wanted to make sure that they had some other types of skills as well as being a good wife in the future. Dobbs said that she enjoyed cooking and sewing. Before her career took off, she would make her own clothes (Washington 1954; Gilderdale 1953). The parents did not want their daughters to choose between domesticity and a career, they wanted them to be able to do both well. Because the parents knew that their children would face struggles due to racism and sexism, they affirmed and encouraged them to be the best that they could be in their professional and home lives (Shaw 1996, 26-29). Dobbs said that her father was supportive of his daughters

having careers of their own and that they should not be limited to work at home. Dobbs said, “My father said he was a believer in women’s liberation because he had six daughters, even though he wanted us to get married, he wanted us to have our own careers” (Douglas 1983).

The parents of these young women thought that an education and proper behavior could curb some of the discrimination they would face. Parents also educated their children at home. They took their children to concerts and other artistic venues. Dobbs recalls this because this was her first exposure to opera. Although at the time, the theater was segregated and her family, as all Black people did, had to sit in the balcony seating. Her father did not let her or her sisters go to places that were segregated unless it was an artistic venue. Dobbs’s experience of having to sit in the balcony was why she would later decide that she would never perform for a segregated audience (Bernheimer 2007, 15). Parents also wanted their daughters to be leaders in the community. One of the main goals of this parenting style was the hope that their daughters would always give back to the community and to never forget where they came from (Shaw 1997, 41-42).

6.1 Race and Its Effects on the Professional Life of Mattiwilda Dobbs

Throughout an opera singer’s career, she/he can expect to sing roles of different ethnicities or races. There is a history of composers who create characters who are not European. Scholars have recently begun to discuss exoticism and Blackness in the operatic realm. *Blackness in Opera* (2012) edited by Naomi André, Karen M. Bryan, and Eric Saylor explore ideas surrounding race, identity, culture, and the staging of Blackness in opera. The book also examines how roles that are for non-Europeans play into stereotypes or not and the controversies surrounding the costuming of characters.

There had not always been a response to opera singers changing their appearance for certain roles. In fact, it is one of the only genres of music where people often accept the imitation or recreation of another culture (André, Bryan, & Saylor 2012, 2). More recent studies have related the darkening of skin to appear “exotic” is like that of blackface minstrelsy. The history of blackface minstrel shows in the United States has been one rooted in racism. In minstrelsy shows, white performers would darken their skin to appear Black and would perform stereotypical roles of African-Americans. Some scholars argue that because opera and minstrelsy are separate genres and performances of the practice of darkening one’s skin that they are somehow unrelated (André, Bryan, & Saylor 2012, 2). This practice, no matter what genre of music, is important to consider given the history of Black people in America and their contributions to music. During the early performances of the Fisk Jubilee Singers, Ward would have them sing behind a curtain and after a couple of the selections the curtains would open. “Blind listening” was a technique used so that white audiences would not react to their race but hear them sing, then assess the performance. This technique was also suggested for soprano, Elizabeth Taylor Greenfield (Stoeber 2016, 132). When African-American classical singers like Elizabeth Taylor Greenfield (1820-1876) had emerged in the nineteenth century, they had received a significant amount of criticism from white audiences. The criticisms were often overtly racist and talked extensively about appearance and talent was not always acknowledged (Eidsheim 2011, 648).

Although minstrel performances performed by white people were racist, African-American singers often performed minstrel songs and other genres. For many of them, the minstrel stage was the only performance space that they had (Eidsheim 2011, 651-652). This is also important in considering how Blackness was presented on stage and how African-American

singers were chosen for particular roles in opera. The practice of darkening skin recently ended at the Metropolitan Opera in 2015 in a production of *Otello* (Cooper 2015). In the introduction of *Blackness in Opera*, the editors raise important questions about the application of makeup to African-American opera singers. If a character should be portrayed as European or white, should African-American opera singers lighten their skin (André, Bryan, & Saylor 2012, 3)?

Bernheimer discusses this in an article in *Opera News* magazine after he interviewed Dobbs. He writes, “Skin color remained a constant issue. Harewood, who admired Dobbs ‘almost as much for stage personality as for voice,’ noted that ‘audiences in the 1950s were surprised to find a black singer in a leading operatic role’” (Bernheimer 2007, 12). David Webster, manager of the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, said that Dobbs would be good for non-white roles such as *Lakmé* (Ibid.).

Some African-American singers did not choose to lighten their skin, but Dobbs stood by her choice. She said, “I don’t understand the controversy. Maybe it was a matter of racial pride for others. I figured, if you’re going to play someone’s daughter, it doesn’t hurt to look like him. I did it throughout my career. White artists who play *Aida* and *Otello* put on dark makeup. Why shouldn’t we wear light makeup when we play a white character?” (Bernheimer 2007, 13). Because the history of applying lighter and darker makeup to portray characters on stage is so complex, there has to be an evaluation of the separation, if there is one, between portraying a character on stage and life not on the stage.

The 1950s in the United States was turbulent time for race relations. In 1954, the United States Supreme Court ruled in the *Brown v. Board of Education*. In 1955, 14-year-old Emmett Till was murdered in Mississippi for whistling and making inappropriate gestures at a white woman, a claim that was later discovered to be false (Majerol, Blinder, and Fausset 2017, 16).

That same year, Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat on the bus, which served as a catalyst for the Montgomery Bus Boycott, which would end the next year (Davis 1998, 26-27). In February of 1956, the same year Dobbs makes her debut at the Metropolitan Opera, Martin Luther King Jr.'s house was bombed in Montgomery, Alabama (*Atlanta Daily World*, February 1, 1956). Understanding the racial climate of the United States during the 1950s, puts the objections to skin lightening and darkening on stage into perspective. Given the nature of what was happening, it could have been considered problematic for an African-American singer to want to apply makeup to appear white on stage.

However, there is also an argument for distinction from the professional and personal. Specifically for Mattiwilda Dobbs, she understood the troubles that African-Americans were facing but being an opera singer was her profession. As she explained it, she was singing the role in which her character is white and she wanted the portrayal of the character to appear authentic. Her reasoning for this was white singers had darkened their skin for roles in Verdi's operas *Aida* and *Otello* (Bernheimer 2007, 13). As discussed earlier, there is a long history of white singers darkening their skin to appear of African or Moorish descent on stage.

There has not been much discussion on African-American singers portraying non-western characters on stage. For example, African-American soprano Camilla Williams, who made her debut with the New York City Opera in 1946, was well-known for her portrayal of Cio-Cio-San in Puccini's *Madama Butterfly* (*Madame Butterfly*). Cio-Cio-San is a Japanese woman, so they used makeup to make Williams appear Japanese. This was interesting because not only was she asked to sing this role, but she sang it right after Japan had surrendered in World War II.¹ If they had not applied the makeup, could an African-American portray a Japanese character?

¹ The plot of *Madama Butterfly* centers on Pinkerton who is an officer in the United States Navy and Cio-Cio-San a Japanese woman. Pinkerton's ship arrives in Japan. The two are supposed to get married and they do. Cio-Cio-

Exoticism, portraying sounds or images of a culture non-western culture, in opera is a complex idea to analyze because exoticism involves othering (Locke, 2009, 66). The settings are usually in the Middle East, Africa, or Asia. These cultures were often described as primitive and thus they fascinated the people of Western cultures. In exoticism, the music, can be borrowed directly from a non-western culture, or the music can be written how the composer imagined music from that culture would sound (Wilson 2012, 62). The challenges with exoticism in opera are that the operas are written from an outsider's perspective, which can result in an inaccurate depiction of a culture and its people and the people who portray the characters are not always of that particular culture (Locke 2009, 327). The problem that most critics have with the portrayal of an African character by a white person darkening their skin for the role is that it reminiscent of minstrelsy and mockery of a culture (André, Bryan, and Saylor 2012, 2).

Mattiwilda Dobbs and Camilla Williams saw no problem with changing the color of their skin for each of their respective roles. Because of the history of blackface minstrelsy and other mockery/parody performances were by white people, audiences were less outraged to see Black women portraying different races because there is no historical precedent that would render a contemporary performance racist. The difference in Williams's career is that after she made her debut as Cio-Cio-San, the artistic directors at the New York City Opera only casted her in roles in which the characters were either Asian or African. Williams says that this was because the opera company did not know how the audience would react to her in lighter makeup and wigs

San's family disowns her for her conversion to the religion of Pinkerton. Pinkerton returns to the United States. When he returns to Japan, he returns with his wife Kate and he also realizes that Cio-Cio-San has given birth to a son. Cio-Cio-San tells Kate that she would give up her son to see Pinkerton. Fearing he might never come back, Cio-Cio-San places an American flag on her son, then kills herself by stabbing. Pinkerton returns but ultimately he is too late (Steen 2012, 4-5).

(Fox 2012). Dobbs, on the other hand, made her debut in lighter makeup. This shows how things were changing in opera from Williams's debut in 1946 to Dobbs's debut in 1956.

Beyond skin color, how the roles for people of color are constructed is important. Many times artistic and casting directors took consideration in giving specific roles to specific singers. Most of the roles in opera are not written for African-Americans or people of African descent. Perhaps the most well-known roles for African-Americans in opera are in Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess*. The roles in the opera have been highly criticized for how they fall into the stereotypical roles for African-Americans (André, Bryan, and Saylor 2012, 165). *Porgy and Bess* was written in 1935 and by 1943, there were performances with all-white casts, predominantly in Europe (Standifer 1997). An all-white cast of *Porgy and Bess* might change the dynamic of the work. Because performance practice calls for authenticity, as instructed by the composer in the score, the reimagining of opera for modern performance has to adhere to the original but also has to be realized in the current cultural context. It is also important to note that Dobbs had an amazing career without having to sing the role of *Bess* or *Aida*. Because of the racial component of these two roles, African-American sopranos are often expected to sing them (Cheatham 1999, 176).

Another component of performance for African-Americans in opera is sound. In *The Sonic Color Line: Race and the Cultural Politics of Listening* (2016), Stoeber presents two theories, the "sonic color line" and the "listening ear." Stoeber describes the "sonic color line" as "the process of racializing—how and why certain bodies are expected to produce, desire, and live amongst particular sounds—and its product, the hierarchical division sounded between 'whiteness' and 'blackness'" (7). Stoeber explains the "listening ear" as a "historical aggregate of normative American listening practices and gives a name to listening's epistemological function as a modality of racial discernment" (13). Many reviews of opera performances often

try to describe the sound of the Black lead's voice. They use descriptors such as, "husky" and "deep-throated" (Story 1990, 185).

Many reviews of Dobbs's performances praised her for voice sounding "almost white" and sounding Black. For example, this review appeared in the *Atlanta Daily World* (April 24, 1949): "Strangely enough, the usual warm, full-throated quality that belongs to her race is not so apparent in her timbre or has not been permitted to form the basis of her singing." Hans Jørgen Hurum for Norwegian newspaper *Aftenposten*, wrote "Her wonderful voice reminds you of the sound from a good violin, because it not only contains light, but also a strange warm and deep sound" (April 20, 1953). These two reviews of Dobbs's performances are examples of how critics from African-American newspapers and European newspapers discussed her voice. With regards to Dobbs's voice, she almost crossed the threshold of the "sonic color line" and challenged her critics' "listening ear," but an important observation is that the sound is only one component of opera performance and her audience still knew that she was African-American because of her physical appearance on stage.

Many African-American opera singers and vocal coaches often felt that discussing vocal differences was not necessary and that singers should just focus on the music. Sylvia Olden Lee, the first African-American vocal coach at the Metropolitan Opera, quoted in *And So I Sing: African-American Divas of Opera and Concert* (1990) by Rosalyn Story, told singers not to worry about sounding Black because focusing on that would lead to typecasting. She argued that if a critic said that African-Americans could not do a certain task that once an African-American person did the task, their argument was invalid (185).

In "Marian Anderson and 'Sonic Blackness' in American Opera" (2011), Eidsheim argues that sounding Black or "sonic Blackness" is a visual projection onto sound (653).

Eidsheim and Stoeve argue similar points that listening is much more than just receiving sound waves through the ears. Eidsheim says,

The prevalent ability to detect acousmatic blackness, or racialized vocal timbre, demonstrates that listening does not connote passive reception of information and is not a neutral activity. . . The ways in which Americans hear black voices are tethered to century-old beliefs about black bodies, and thus listening to opera in the United States is an archaeological endeavor (665).

Dobbs could sound almost “white,” but her body on stage contradicted that. Her voice could not be separated from her body on stage.

Barbara Moore, African-American professor of Voice at Southern Methodist University, quoted in Story’s work, argues that the sound of a singer’s voice is cultural and that some cultures prefer deeper, robust sounds not just African-American cultures. She argues, and Story concurs, that Blackness is not synonymous with Black people, rather it is synonymous with darkness of sound (Story 1990, 187). The argument that the preference of “dark” or “warm” sounds as cultural would be stronger if critics did not use race as a reference in their reviews.

In *Unsung Voices: Opera and Musical Narrative in the Nineteenth Century* (1991), Abbate uses the term “voice-object (or vocal object),” a term originally coined by Michel Poizat in his work *The Angel’s Cry: Beyond the Pleasure Principle in Opera* (1986), to describe how in opera performances the sound of the voice of the singer becomes the focal point for the audience. The “voice-object,” she argues, is different from the musical voice. The musical voice can be described as voice parts such as soprano or alto, but the musical voice can also be described as distinct melodic lines that make up a musical composition. She asserts that the sound of the voice is what pulls people to the opera, thus, the “voice-object” (10).

In his work *The Angel’s Cry*, Poizat argues that the “vocal object” can become problematic for the audience if it challenges or interrupts the way they expect to hear certain

performances. He says that this is because the audience has already envisioned the sound and associated it with how they initially felt when hearing the opera for the first time (Poizat 1986, 102). Neither Abbate nor Poizat are discussing race in their analyses, however, the “vocal object” idea can be applied to the discussion of sounding Black in opera. When African-American opera singers emerged on the stage, it was often said that African-Americans could not sing opera specifically because of the sound of their voice. Dr. Geerd Heinsen wrote a review of African-American mezzo-soprano Cynthia Clarey’s performance as Nicklausse in *The Tales of Hoffman* in Berlin in 1985 and described her voice as “too Negroid for the French vocal line” (Story 1990, 185-186). The “voice-object” or the sound of her voice challenged the way that the critic was used to hearing this particular opera. Although that particular review was negative, a review of Dobbs’s debut at the Metropolitan Opera showed how the “voice-object” and its Blackness gave the critic a new way to hear the opera. Douglas Watt for the *Daily News* wrote,

A coloratura soprano, Miss Dobbs is alone among her contemporaries in being able to combine florid vocalism with warmth of expression. I, for one, attribute this happy circumstance partly to the characteristic veiled tones that distinguish the Negro voice from any other (November 10, 1956).

In an operatic performance, the audience is responding to the visual and musical representation of the story. For African-Americans opera singers, well-received or not, the “vocal object” or sound of their voice cannot be separated from their physical Blackness.

In regards to the performance of Negro spirituals, by 1971, Dobbs was critical of African-American singers who had moved away from including them in their repertoire. She also criticized singers who moved away from singing in the original dialect (Lens-News Service 1971). It was expected that African-American singers would include spirituals in their performances. Often singers choose their programs and create sets with songs by language, time period, or an emotion. A set of spirituals was expected of them (Noonan 2012, 161). One of the

reasons for this movement away from the performance of spirituals was the emergence and transformation of gospel music. Gospel artists started incorporating sounds from genres such as funk and r&b and the changes in sound allowed gospel music to become more mainstream. As a result of gospel music's sonic connection to secular genres, gospel artists gained a new, broader audience (Boyer 1995, 257-259).

Although Dobbs wanted to keep spirituals in the repertoire of Black classical singers, some music critics did not want her to sing them. David Robson of *The Northern Echo*, a newspaper in England, wrote, "One wonders if in Negro Spirituals, even though consummately sung by Mattiwilda Dobbs at her recital last night in the Richmond Georgian Theater, the singer's talents were not wasted, especially with the whole gamut of Schubert's lieder to go at" (March 20, 1967).

Dobbs also said that she had never performed for a segregated audience and that was because it would have been hard to do given the context of her upbringing in the South (Sinclair 1968). This review was written by William Gordon in 1954 in the *Atlanta Daily World* describing the audience and Dobbs's performance,

One could sense the genuineness of the white guests. For they scattered themselves about the auditorium, asking no special privilege or recognition. They were not interested in social status or class levels. They came to hear an angel sing . . . Before them was a young Negro singer, the best in the world today and who is not even yet at her peak, singing to both races on her native Southland. She stood before two groups, one like herself, which had been denied the opportunity for full development, and another, although sympathetic, were victims of a heritage they had nothing to do with . . . On the wings of her voice will flow other things. Some in particular will be the prayers and devotions of a race of people, who, despite their circumstances, will rise out of the ashes of waste and deprivation. The white people who heard her will have to return to their communities, not out of hate or ill feeling for the Negro, but for respect and the appreciation that the dignity of the human being is not restricted to pigmentation or religion. Like the hundreds of whites who came to hear Miss Dobbs, the greatest in her field today, others will hear and respect Negroes in every profession in the days to come (March 14, 1954).

William Gordon implies that Dobbs, at this performance, brings the white and Black audience members together and that, in some way, Dobbs's performance had changed the way white audience members visualize African-Americans as a race. Gordon also said that the white audience members were "victims of a heritage they had nothing to do with." In 1954, Atlanta was a segregated city. When the ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education* case was given and it was decided that the segregation of schools was unconstitutional, the white Atlantans actively tried to thwart the implementation of the ruling. Georgia lawmakers created the "Private School Plan," a plan that stated that if a school was integrated, it would not receive funds from the state and would ultimately be closed (Hein 1972, 205). It was clear that African-Americans faced discrimination in Atlanta, white Atlantans were unhappy with integration, and at every turn white people tried to impede the success of African-Americans. When Gordon said white audience members are "victims of a heritage they had nothing to do with," it posed a contradiction to the social and cultural context of Atlanta in 1954 because white people created and fostered segregation and second-class citizenship for African-Americans.

Also, Gordon may be assuming that because the white audience members came to see an African-American singer and sat amongst African-Americans that they did not harbor any prejudiced sentiments about African-Americans. This argument could be true, but it is important to note that it would have been highly unlikely, not impossible, for an African-American church or establishment, like Wheat Street Baptist Church, to have segregated seating. Wheat Street Baptist Church is where this performance took place. Also, throughout the history of the United States many white people have gone to performances featuring African-Americans, but that does not necessarily negate their acts of racism or prejudiced attitudes. When Gordon wrote this

review he was hoping that the white audience members would be so moved by the performance, that they would begin to recognize the humanity of Black people.

Because Dobbs represented Black excellence, when other African-Americans were not reaching the same levels the writers of the *Atlanta Daily World* were critical of them. In response to the raising of the question, “Why is it, that few Negroes rise to the level of Marian Anderson and Mattiwilda Dobbs in the field of music?” William Gordon of the *Atlanta Daily World* responded,

I realize that other barriers, economic, social and otherwise, are to be considered. But basically the element of complacency plays no ordinary role in our pathway to success. I have been told by many young musicians that economics was a factor. Many of them, gifted with music, didn’t want to work or sacrifice the long hours, days and years speculating on success . . . Instead of hard work and initiative, we blind ourselves to the outsider world and are content to survive in a circumscribed atmosphere. This limits professional growth (May 16, 1954).

Mattiwilda Dobbs’s achievements became a standard for other African-Americans classical singers. She went to college, became an expert in her field, and excelled in every aspect of her performance. Dobbs became the ultimate representation of African-American success in the United States and internationally.

6.2 Race and Its Effects on the Personal Life of Mattiwilda Dobbs

Dobbs also spoke about the backlash she received in New York after she had married Bengt Janzon, a white Swedish man. When people saw them together they received mean looks from others (Dunbar 1968, 217). When traveling back to the United States, she avoided bringing her husband to Atlanta because she felt that the city was in chaos and was trying to go through the processes of integration (Ibid., 219).

A headline for the *New Zealand Herald* read, “Back of the Bus to Top in Field: The world famous operatic soprano, Mattiwilda Dobbs, remembers the days when she was ordered to

the back of the buses in her hometown as ‘a nigger chile’” (*New Zealand Herald*, May 14, 1971). In the article, Dobbs discusses growing up in the Deep South. She said, “My father taught us from infancy about the injustice of racial discrimination. He impressed upon us that we should not feel inferior despite the efforts of local whites to make us feel so.” Self-confidence and self-sufficiency was another facet of the upbringing of young African-American women. The goal of raising them this way, was that they would have a strong foundation in which they could build their lives upon. Through Dobbs’s words many of the lessons remained with her into her adult life.

6.3 Europe and Its Effects on Mattiwilda Dobbs’s Career and Personal Life

Dobbs said that she never felt discrimination while in Europe and she was very aware of race because she grew up in the Southern United States. Germany was the only place that she traveled where she was conscious of her race. She said, “In most other countries, I really forgot I was colored—you just do forget, you become an individual, which is what every Negro wants” (Dunbar, 1968, 216).

In the interview, she mentioned being aware of race in Germany and this could have been for a few different reasons. This interview took place in 1968 and she was asked to reflect on her career. The consequences of World War II and the ideas surrounding race in Germany shaped her view of the country before she visited (Dunbar 1968, 215). Also, African-American soprano, Grace Brumby’s performance in Germany at the Bayreuth Festival singing the role of Venus in Richard Wagner’s *Tannhäuser* in 1961 could have contributed to Dobbs’s awareness. Brumby’s performance sparked many discussions about race in post-WWII Germany. Brumby also changed her appearance to sing the role. Because the artistic director wanted the character to have an exotic look, he chose Brumby. For the performance, she was covered in gold but it was

apparent to the audience and the critics that she was African-American because the reviews of the performance mentioned her appearance. Brumby said that she did not realize, at first, that people were so outraged about her performance. She talked to a close friend and then that's when she came to the conclusion that racism was not only existed in the United States but also in Germany (Thurman 2012, 615-617). Because Dobbs also lived in Europe during this time, she might have heard about the performance.

Dobbs also said that she avoided white Americans in Europe. She was relieved when she discovered that her interviewer (Dunbar) was African-American. She said she was always anxious about meeting new white Americans. Dobbs felt that she did not know what to expect from them or how they would treat her (Dunbar 1968, 219). Dobbs says she felt more at home in Sweden and that she had not experienced much discrimination. "I have been asked if I have run across any prejudice in Sweden, but I must say honestly that I have not. In their hearts, Swedes try to do what's right" (Dukes 1971). She thought that Sweden encompassed both American proficiency and a traditional European flare (Dunbar 1968, 214). Dobbs said, "I am really a European singer. Even though I return to sing in the United States each year, I have never come back" (Witherspoon 1970). Dobbs felt that opera was much more accessible in Europe than in America because the number of opera houses and opera companies was significantly higher in Europe (Sibley 1954).

In an interview with Ofield Dukes for the *Michigan Chronicle*, Dobbs describes Sweden as "a cradle of humanitarianism." She also said, "They care about other people—especially the poor, the oppressed, the have-nots. In this frame of things comes their great concern about Black Americans and Africans" (December 25, 1971). In interviews, Dobbs often compared life in Sweden to life in the United States. She said that because her husband worked in health and

welfare that she became more aware of the issues that were plaguing people (*Auckland Star*, May 13, 1971).

Dobbs experienced much success in opera in Europe because at the height of her career, opera in Europe was popular and still regularly performed. When Dobbs first performed at La Scala, she did not realize the impact that it would have. She said that if she had realized that she would have been too nervous to perform under that amount of pressure (Sinclair 1968). Dobbs would go on to sing in front of Europe's and Asia's leaders. While performing in Europe, Dobbs said that opera is more successful in Europe, because it is sung in the native language of each country and it is commonly performed for young children and adults. In the United States, opera is usually sung in the language that the opera was written. The opera audiences in America are comprised of opera lovers and upper-class people (Weinberg 1973, 52). Dobbs also said that opera in the United States should be funded by the government, like opera in European countries, to make sure that opera continued to grow (Lens-News Service 1971).

Dobbs also spoke about women in Europe versus women in the United States. In the interview, Dunbar asked, "Do you feel more of a complete woman in Europe?" Dobbs responded, "Well . . . no. It depends on what countries you're in. In the Latin countries women aren't as emancipated as they are in the United States—but here [Sweden], this is a great country for independent women with careers . . . But the Spanish people are more like *Negroes* . . . But apart from that, I felt very much at home there" (Dunbar 1968, 220). Dobbs felt that African-American women were limited in some way based on gender. Respectability, being one of the early lessons learned, limited African-American women because it placed parameters on how they could express themselves. Dobbs said that she would give up her professional life for her personal life if she had to. A year after her marriage to Bengt Janzon, Dobbs said, "We look

forward to a family in the near future; private life is the main thing. If it came to choosing between that and a career, I'd give up singing" (*Opera News*, March 31, 1958, 9). Her sentiments had changed about this after the death of her first husband. Dobbs said that she did not get to be domestic in her first marriage because it was at the beginning of her career and she traveled often (Gilderdale 1953).

Mattiwilda Dobbs also defended her choice of being based primarily in Europe. Many African-American artists throughout history have made Europe their permanent home like James Baldwin, who Dobbs shared a friendship with. When asked does she feel that she should be in America in the late 1960s, she responded by saying that although she felt separated from what was happening, she felt that the most beneficial way that she could give back to the African-American community was to excel in her field (Dunbar 1968, 222). She said,

I know a lot of American Negroes who criticize those who leave the problem, for running away. To stay in America and fight for your race or go to Europe to get away from it; I don't think that should be your main thing. You should have other things in life, as a human being, that you put before race. I think above everything else you should be a human being (Ibid.).

This sentiment could be attributed to her upbringing because of the expectation to excel in personal and professional life but also to give back to your community in your own way.

Dobbs also praised Sweden for their religious practices. She said, "About 98 percent of the Swedish population is born into the state church but less than four percent attend on Sunday. Church attendance is not that important in Sweden, because they live out their Christianity every day. They're not hypocrites who go to church on Sunday and treat people bad in their daily lives. This to me, is a real, working kind of religion." She goes on, "But if I had to choose between people going to church just because it's the social thing to do, and Swedes who act out their beliefs that they are in fact, their brother's keeper, I would rather have the Swedish way." (Dukes

1971). In this excerpt, Dobbs implied that there was a custom in which church attendance was purely a display of societal norms in which the churchgoers attended weekly services to be seen by others in the community and did not actually practice their religious beliefs during the week.

6.4 Class

Dobbs said that she did not feel that she was at a disadvantage being African-American and from the South. In an interview in March of 1954 with Celestine Sibley for *The Atlanta Constitution*, she said, “We had money troubles, but everybody has those, and my folks were determined that we’d all get as good an education as possible. I was handicapped, just as all young singers are handicapped, by the fact that in America there are not as many concert opportunities as there are in Europe. In Europe nearly every town has an opera house and there’s always an audience for a concert. That’s wonderful training for a singer” (March 12, 1954). Wallace Cheatham in an article titled “African-American Women Singers at the Metropolitan Opera before Leontyne Price” (1999) says, “Mattiwilda Dobbs was born into, bred by, and nurtured among the southern African-American bourgeoisie tradition and lifestyle, the Black Aristocracy” (175). Cheatham asserts that because of her father’s status in the Atlanta community as a leader, she was afforded more opportunities. He says,

Mattiwilda Dobbs was groomed from childhood for the prima donna role. Moreover, the electro-dynamic, philosophical, psychological, monetary, and visionary cushions that had been provided for her by family members made it possible for goals to be pursued without fear, worry, and turmoil, a blessing that few African-American students, particularly those in the “classical music genres,” ever experience. When Miss Dobbs received scholarships, they were “stepping stones,” not gifts to make it possible for her to get needed and appropriate training (176).

From the excerpt in the *Atlanta Constitution*, Dobbs said that her family had financial struggles, so although they were not poor, they were not always financially stable. Her father’s status in the community proved to be beneficial for her pursuing a career as an opera singer.

Since her father had such an active role in the community, she had a large amount of exposure to different professionals in various fields. The argument that the scholarships that she earned fairly were only “stepping stones” for her as if they are not “stepping stones” for all singers is misleading. Having financial stability would not have propelled her into a career as an opera singer. The money that she received from the scholarships helped her to move to Europe. Dobbs said in many interviews that those scholarships propelled her career because they gave her opportunity that she would not necessarily have had. She said,

However, it was the John Hay Whitney Award for minority groups in any field, received in 1950, which gave me that needed impetus to proceed . . . It was a three thousand dollar award which permitted me to go abroad to study in Paris with Pierre Bernac, noted baritone, who presented many joint recitals with the noted 20th century French composer, Francois [Francis] Poulenc” (Heglund 1973).

Scholarships and scholarship competitions are “stepping stones” with a monetary bonus for all winners. Often, singers want to study under someone who has an expertise in their field. Dobbs was looking to expand her repertoire and realized that singing competitions could afford her the opportunity to study with a teacher who would meet her needs. During this time, she was becoming more self-sufficient, a value that was taught in her home from a young age. Dobbs said that her father supported her financially until she started receiving scholarships and after her first year in Europe, she no longer needed his support (Fields 1955). She received musical training from a young age because her father required it and he worked for more than thirty years to make sure that he could provide that for all of his daughters. Cheatham continues,

The “advantaged background” of Miss Dobbs may have kept her from achieving even greater heights than those attained, because the Caucasian media often takes great delight in sensationalizing the accomplishments of African-Americans when those individuals have done everything without support systems from their own kind, thus keeping alive, and continually projecting the “super-nigger syndrome.” Miss Dobbs’ background made this kind of “grandstanding” impossible (176).

In regards to musical training, she was not the only well-known opera singer to begin piano or singing at a very young age. The advantage that Cheatham must be referring to is her father's social and political status. Cheatham argues that because of her middle-class background, white media outlets were not able to cast her narrative as a rags-to-riches story. In fact, many international media outlets did cast her narrative as a rags-to-riches story. This could have been the result of international outlets not knowing the impact her family had on the African-American community, but only knowing her Southern roots and recalling the South's history of discrimination against African-Americans. To Cheatham's point that her background could have stifled her career as a singer because of media outlets, is not necessarily true. Dobbs had a very successful career and almost always received positive reviews from critics. Because American media outlets could not make the case for a rags-to-riches story does not mean that it hindered her career. There were other aspects that could have affected her career in the United States such as her choice to live in Europe during the prime of her career or the eight-year hiatus she took after her time at the Metropolitan Opera.

6.5 Gender in Opera

The history of African-American singers on the operatic stage has been complex. Historically, the number of African-American women who have had careers in opera is higher than that of African-American men. African-American women singers crossed into the international opera world before African-American men. Wallace Cheatham argues that this is because of the image of an African-American man pursuing a white woman would not have been well received. During the 1940s and 1950s, the image might have been a problem for the white patrons at certain opera houses (Cheatham, 1997, 9-10).

For Mattiwilda Dobbs, her emergence into opera was not necessarily limited by her gender. From Cheatham's perspective, she was privileged by her gender. Because an African-American woman being pursued by a white man was a softer image, she was able to start and ultimately have a successful career as an opera singer. When Dobbs began her career in opera, she probably would not have thought that she was exercising a privilege because of the societal norms surrounding gender during the time period. From Cheatham's perspective, Blackness created a setback for African-American men while gender gave African-American women a privilege in opera.

Appearance is another aspect of performance in which singers are judged. When the first African-American prima donnas emerged in the United States, their appearance was a topic of discussion for music critics. They were given racialized nicknames (i.e. "The Black Swan"). Dobbs never received a nickname but was compared to singer Lily Pons (Gilderdale 1953). Many critics referenced Dobbs's appearance, in terms of beauty, weight, or movement on stage. When described by international critics, they often described her appearance in terms of skin color and American critics tended to describe her beauty. On July 1, 1953, an article written by Michael Gilderdale in the *London News Chronicle* read, "She has come to Glyndebourne from America's deep South with her fuzz of raven hair and skin the colour of golden molasses." Another headline read, "A Dark Enchantress is Gilda: Mattiwilda Dobbs, the beautiful young Negress, was more enchanting than ever as Gilda in *Rigoletto* at Covent Garden last night" (*Daily Herald*, May 7, 1954). Dobbs is described as "a dark enchantress" for a character in which she lightened her skin to portray.

Headlines in the United States read: "Black and Beautiful" (Gulliver 1973), "The comely young Negro soprano, Mattiwilda Dobbs, in her local debut in a recital in the Phillips Gallery

yesterday, made a deep impression with her singing” (*Atlanta Daily World*, November 29, 1949), “Attractive Mattiwilda Dobbs, brilliant young soprano, who was heard in recital at Spelman College recently, makes perfect camera study from photographer’s point of view” (*Chicago Defender*, December 10, 1949), “Mattiwilda Dobbs a beautiful, clear-skinned, flashing eyed creature, sat perched in her bed” (Washington 1954), and “The artist, clad in a sheath-like dress, the color of an American Beauty rose, was as pleasant to look at as she was to hear, and her walk and her ease on the stage are definitely among her assets” (Permenter 1955). Appearance, for opera singers, has always been a part of the conversation in regards to roles and performances. The creative directors and casting agents often choose singers who they think would not only compliment a role vocally but also physically (Eidsheim 2011, 662).

6.6 Intersections of Race, Class, and Gender

For Mattiwilda Dobbs, being an African-American opera singer had its advantages and disadvantages. She entered a field in which there were not many African-Americans present. As the first African-American to sing at La Scala and the first African-American leading lady at the Metropolitan Opera, brought Dobbs, her family, and her community much joy. Following Marian Anderson, she broke racial barriers in opera and became a symbol of how far the combination of hard work and education could take African-Americans. Although she had moved to Europe, she felt that she was serving her community not only by excelling in her career, but also by singing Negro spirituals in recital. She saw this as her service to the community.

Understanding how her upbringing shaped her ideas about domesticity and having a career, it becomes clearer to see how her views changed over time. While she was younger, she was more career-driven and after the loss of her first husband, she indicated that she

would take a step back from singing to have a family. Taking a step back from her singing career does not necessarily mean that she would have been a stay-at-home wife, but because of Bengt Janzon's position as the Director of Public Relations for National Board of Health and Welfare in Sweden, this could have been a possibility, if she had had children.

7 CONCLUSION

Mattiwilda Dobbs had a very prolific career for decades. She was one of a small number of African-American singers to reach international notoriety. She had the opportunity to study music from a young age. The purpose of this thesis was to examine Dobbs's experience in opera and to understand how race, class, and gender affected her career, and then place her within the broader discussion of African-American women opera singers.

Beginning with Dobbs's overall experience in opera, she had tremendous prosperity throughout her career. She gave recitals and performances all over the world often to rave reviews. Her voice was cherished in the world of opera and in the African-American community. For many, she was the epitome of Black excellence and represented African-Americans well. Dobbs was the first African-American romantic lead at the Metropolitan Opera. She was a pioneer in her field. Being the first leading lady at the Met, she began to transform the racial landscape of opera.

Race, class, and gender would each have distinct impacts on her personal and professional life. In opera, the decision to lighten or darken the skin has always been very controversial. Dobbs saw no problem with this particular practice, she thought it added more authenticity to the performance. Another aspect of race that she never mentioned was her sound. Many critics thought that Dobbs challenged the "sonic color line" and the "listening ear." Her ability to almost be perceived as white worked to her advantage for her being a coloratura soprano. In coloratura sopranos, critics and audience members often listen for lightness and agility. She was often praised for her warmth in singing spirituals and her lightness in singing Mozart.

Respectability politics also factored in to how Dobbs was raised and also how she would appear to the world. Being part of a middle-class family, gave Dobbs exposure to many different career options. She was able to have musical training from a young age, this was not rare among African-Americans. Her father was able to put all of his children through college. Dobbs felt that education was essential to personal, professional, and community growth. She was taught that education would propel her forward regardless of the field she chose. When she chose opera, the image she portrayed was very important. She always appeared polished and neat and she was the embodiment of what hard work and education looked like.

After Dobbs married Bengt Janzon, she made Europe her home. She felt that in Europe, she could escape the racial injustices that were prevalent in the United States. She felt that her service to her community was excelling in her career living in the United States was not necessary. Also, singing in the most well-known opera houses in Europe, Australia, and Asia was important to her, because that meant that she was successful.

Being the first leading lady at the Metropolitan Opera, Dobbs changed the way that audience members saw Black women on stage. When Marian Anderson sang at the Met, her role was a supporting role, so she broke the initial racial barrier. Dobbs continued the breakdown of the racial barrier, but she also showed that Black women could be romantic leads or love interests, which ultimately challenged stereotypical roles given to Black women.

A difference in Dobbs's experience from the broad experiences of African-American sopranos was that, she never sang the two roles expected of African-American sopranos, which are *Bess* and *Aida*. It is unknown why she did not sing these roles, it could have been for personal reasons or she was never offered the part. This is a major difference between her experience and the experiences of other African-American opera singers. Like the other singers,

she studied her parts and she performed well. Most reviews say that she sang with precision. Dobbs was one of the last opera singers to have a prolific career before the era of television opera, which changed the way opera was consumed by American audiences. Because of her talent and determination, Mattiwilda Dobbs opened the doors for singers like Leontyne Price, Jessye Norman, and Kathleen Battle.

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